

~Journey Concepts~

An Astral Quest of Horror and Fantasy

Owen Johnston

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Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
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Journey Concepts/Fiction (mostly!)

1st Edition

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Journey Concepts

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Sailing into the sunset,
I leave all darkness behind me;
Days now gone by I can forget,
Sailing across the sea.
Shadows are falling around me now,
And sun and ocean seem to have met;
Still I sail down that path of gold
Into the far sunset.

- Hugh Buckner Johnston,
Sailing into the Sunset

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Part I:
Through the Dark Valley

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Shades of Gray

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Shades of Gray

I cannot help but to every so often sit and contemplate the meaning of things, how a man gazing from his window, watching the leaves breeze by, seems to know a little too much about the many shades of gray, those of the literal and those of meaning, and the very nature of existence.

How often is one inspired to sit and ponder such things, and also ponder that which we take for granted about what we believe we know? I can especially recall a rather shady day many years ago, the events of which are still vivid and clear in my mind. The very core and definition of these recalled events are yet rather shady to me, both literally and abstractly.

My recollection of the strangeness of that brisk, late August day begins with its most glorious of sunsets. I had been taking my usual shortcut through my neighbor's yard from the street behind my own. I had been paying special attention to this sunset, and the very mood of things at the time.

With every step, I caught a refreshing lungful of cool, nature-conditioned and fragranced air, as a wooing zephyr ran its fingers through my hair. Even the sunset carried with it such soft-spoken pleasures, and bore such beautiful hues that, if impressed by happenstance upon the casual wanderer, its shades of waning day would be long remembered. Such hues upon God's great canvas I had never before seen the sun paint, along with shady, yet almost living, breathing strokes of animated gray clouds. Even the sun itself seemed to thrive in two worlds as it took its residence on the horizon. Balance, or the seeking for it, was one world, and the other was Judgment, reserved for the end of the day.

However, as I continued towards my house, and the waning beams of light let on thickening layers of darkness, those shades of gray, the entire scene remained altogether acquiescent, almost painfully peaceful, and deeply devoid of any sound or commotion from within or without. As I continue to inspect this very scene over and over in my mind, I find that it seemed to foreshadow the scenes that unfolded in a somewhat similar fashion later that evening.

Indeed, later that evening, as I was relaxing in the solarium, things remained to be strangely quiet. Ironically, a loud, persistent knock on the back door broke the silence. "Who in the world might be knocking at my door," I thought to myself, "at this time of night?"

I cautiously stood up and slowly trodded towards the door, and opened it in just the same fashion. To my relief, it was simply a young-looking man, with yet a few years more on him than I, standing on the other side. I noticed that he was carrying a professional-looking briefcase, whose contents, as well as the importance pertaining thereto, I am to this day still unsure of. He mentioned his name to me as I began to welcome him in. However, over the years, I have forgotten what it was. I do recall the gist of our initial conversation.

"I am trying to keep away from him," the fellow spoke, "and it is important that I hide myself away for just a little while. The dark one must not find me and what I carry."

"No problem," I replied in an effort to calm him somewhat, "I have an extra room. You can stay and work with your things in there."

"Thank you," he began again, "I really appreciate it. I wish I had a way to repay you."

Shades of Gray continued

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him, "I'm sure that your mission is indeed important. I'll do what I can to help. Just the mention of a 'dark one' sends chills up my spine. Oh, by the way, I was about to get along to bed myself. I'll show you to your room on the way."

We went about our way through the house, and I indeed showed him to the room, which is located near mine. That was fortunate enough, for if there was to be any trouble, I was only a room away.

From there, the fellow began shuffling through his mysterious, yet obviously important briefcase. I checked up on the rest of the house, as I prepared for what was to be a good night's sleep - or so I thought.

I had already been sleeping comfortably when there came a ring on the doorbell and a loud, yet perfectly measured series of knocks on the door. As I sat up quickly in surprise, I wondered for the second time that night who could possibly be at the door at such a time. Yet, could this time be the coming of this 'dark one' as it was foretold by my guest, looking for his target, his victim, his prey, his enemy?

With that thought in mind, I proceeded out of bed to greet he who was on the other side of the door. It was to be the only way that I would lay to rest my apprehensions as well as shed some light on my guest and the so-named 'dark one'.

As I approached the door, I put my eye on the peephole to catch a glimpse of my second late-night guest. What I saw puzzled me and yet even worried me somewhat. I saw nothing. Literally nothing. It appeared that the whole neighborhood had just blacked out and become darkness.

For a few seconds, I stood there, frozen-like, weighted down with heavy ponderings. Yes, the night had continued to lay upon our half of the world its layers of darkness, the sun had set upon our wrath and into its world of judgment, and the world still yet almost seemed strangely devoid of sound...I could hear my own heart beating.

Could it have been judgment on the other side of the door, he who will come to them that are not ready, as a "thief in the night"? Or the "blackness and darkness of death" which is reserved for them at judgment? Or possibly, the concentrated powers of evil to thwart a holy mission for good?

At long last, I opened the door, and took a single step out. It was there, at such a close proximity, that I noticed what the darkness was that I first witnessed from behind the door. It was, in actuality, the 'dark one' himself.

I stood frozen again, before this shade, this shade of a man that might be, or might have been. Yes, I stood before him, I in my balance, and he in judgment. A shade of gray he surely was.

"I am looking for a young fellow," the dark one spoke with a slow sureness, "who goes by a certain name."

A name was mentioned by him, a name which most certainly belonged to the man that had become reluctant guest in my home.

"Tell me if you have seen him," the dark one beseeched, "or if he is here."

"I've met no one by that name," said I while attempting to keep a straight face, "and in the name of Jesus Christ, get thee away from this place and never return."

Those were the last words we spoke one to another; I immediately stepped back inside, being the least bit interested in

Shades of Gray continued

seeing what mode of travel that dark man used, whether the four winds or just two dark feet.

That was that. I decided to attempt to sleep the rest of the night and not dwell too much on those events before the daylight and hope dawned once more. Come morning, I would also bid my happenstance guest goodbye and good luck.

Indeed, the events that transpired that night were peculiar, mind-boggling, yet altogether thought-provoking. I hadn't noticed on that day, but as I have of late given it much further thought,

I find that it was yet just as much a lesson for me as it was a small part of the struggle between good and evil. The sunset that day, its shades of gray, its clouds, the sun itself existing in two worlds, the coming of night, and the next morning seemed to all mirror me and aspects of myself.

With the sunset and ending of the day, I remembered the Biblical saying "let the sun not go down upon your wrath", in which the true meaning to be gained is that one should not rest in the fight for good. Settle what you can before the sun goes down and the night becomes you. Settle what you can in life before your sunset quickly approaches and death becomes you, that you would be prepared for the eternity you will face afterwards. Be a benefactor for holiness, and the unending internal conflict of the cosmos.

The sun on the horizon signified my very nature. The image of the sun on the horizon symbolizes existence in two worlds, one being balance, and the other judgment. The greater aspect of the nature of the cosmos is represented by the setting sun. The universe is balance, ordered chaos, mathematical spontaneity. Yet, with the setting of the sun, comes the struggle, and the judgment itself, with the old universe eventually wearing down, Heaven coming down to all those blessed, and the darkness and blackness of death in the lake of fire reserved for the unrepented. We find that the young fellow represents balance, as well as the struggle. The dark one represents judgment, in another way signifies evil, and yet in another way the coming of the darkness and blackness of death for whom it is reserved.

The young man and the dark one even represent the respective sides of myself and each one of us. The man held himself true and balanced, and carried his work with him. I suppose that his briefcase can be compared to that which all of us should carry and work from in talking to others about God, and working for Him: God's Word. Let neither any person, nor the clouds of stresses gone by (like unto the clouds blotting out wonderful hues in the perfect sunset), nor evil things, change it or blot it. The dark one was that thief in the night, the darkest shade of gray (both literally and abstractly), the dark blot coming to throw out the good. The unlikely guest was yet prepared and inside the house of balance and true chaos was not let in.

With the wrath now gone and the peace of the good night coming, the sun, as well as hope, would indeed dawn again. Yes, dear God, I'm ready for the struggle. Love is the light that conquers all other shades of gray!

Shades of Gray continued

Lives there in all the universe a man
Who never sensed the stirring in his soul
Of some ambitious and more noble plan
Or conscious yearning towards a higher goal?
Who never did possess a secret shrine
Devoted to some woman sweet and chaste
In whom all beautiful and good combine
And in whose eyes he feels himself abased?
Who never built a castle in the air
And over some imagined realm was king,
Nor ever longed to have an empress there
And children all his own to laugh and sing?
Show me that man, whate'er his creed or race,
And let me cast the lie into his face!

- Hugh Buckner Johnston, Sonnet to Life's Meaning

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsBeams of Darkness

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Beams of Darkness

Beams of darkness and ensuing night, I bid thee to not engulf my very essence during my endeavor to rid this accursed house of its daunting embodiment of terror.

I am not unsure of myself, as I have indulged myself in countless similar exorcisms. Nonetheless, there is a strong foreboding within my soul about this place. I and my partner, the premiere holy woman of the region, sense a great sort of emanation of evil from a concentrated source the likes of which neither of us have ever encountered.

The house, now half overgrown by ever-present nature, was built ages ago, on the site of a strongly spiritual realm. The spirits that inhabit this place manifest emotions and feed upon hidden fears, to increase their aura and haunt the house's living inhabitants. From local reports, it appears that these spirits may even be demonic in nature.

The most fortunate inhabitants died from sheer terror of meeting with horror and darkness incarnate. Those less fortunate than they escaped with their lives, yet had to live out the rest of their days stricken by darkness and terror upon their soul. Has the moral substance of society degraded so far as to provoke such wrath and invoke such a spell on the manner of men?

Indeed, my partner and I are here to refute the theory, and reclaim the house as rightful inhabitance for all men. Yes, she did truly approach me that fateful day, and beseeched me to assist her, for my prowess as a paladin and my skill with the holy blade yet surpass their already great legend. My partner herself has also accomplished no small amount of fame, even at the ripe young age she appears to be, for her holy incantations and success with exorcisms. Truly, if I am all the more the physical aspect of our holy visitation, then she signifies the spiritual aspect.

Yes, I myself, not unlike my partner, must walk the way of truth and light and honor; it is my unending mission to cast away all darkness from the ways of the world and the hearts of men. When the light comes, the shadows must flee. The darkness still yet tries envelop to the world in its cloak, but I must stay strong. That is the way that it has to be, the way it must be, I am sure of it...

...These thoughts were racing through my head, as we watched, from behind the long window in the house's northside room, the night beginning to lay its layers of darkness upon the light of day. Even during the day, this room catches only a very shaded amount of light, for this house, which was once vital and busy, now succumbs to the oppressive overgrowth. We must not let the horror of such evil snare us in its web of eternal darkness.

We now await any sign of the very weaver of this web, the one that weaves this dark web upon the souls of men. Our suspicion grows thicker, as does the thickness of the darkness, the very thickness of the utter, unnatural silence that is of the sound of nonexistence and is at the same time bold in its loudness, its existence of nonexistence.

The tension in the air has drawn tight, and is seemingly waiting for release, like unto a man upon a highwire. The silence continues to grow, and speaks so loudly now that it would make a pantomime seem a bold speaker in contrast.

Beams of Darkness continued

Irony of ironies, do I hear someone rapping on the door? Or is it my own heart beating upon the door of my chest, as if to leap out and carry me with it in a sprint of fear? Am I too sure of myself, yet too concerned over the overgrowth of darkness upon the day, of evil upon the world, of horror upon the souls of men? Could I be allowing myself to fall in the house's snare of terror personified? Could it be terror itself knocking on the door, ready to open it, and even ready to open that door which leads to my soul?

I must turn and face my partner, who stands close behind me, for she is already beginning her incantations. I must ready myself for the inevitable battle, as she blesses my sword. Yet, what will happen, should I fail? What if I fail...I cannot think such thoughts! Let me turn, and look fate in the eyes!

...Outside! Even through the vines and weeds that half cover the window, I can see it, in the moon's scarce light, approaching from the overgrown lawn! It is the embodiment of terror, a huge, four-armed monstrosity with the most wicked of smiles upon its face! It approaches with the slowness, the sureness, and the silence of death!

Wait, where is my partner? She disappeared while my back was turned! Has her spirit already succumbed? Then I shall be the next victim...Where shall I hide? Or has the door to terror already opened?!?.....

...Yes, the bedroom!.....I'll hide myself there...

...This can't be happening.....No, no, no...

...Can't think, can't think.....Think, think!...

...Yes, down this west hall...

...And then it is the first room on the left...

...Move, move, move.....Yes.....It is safe here...

...What? What is that noise?

...It sounds like...An insect, a rat?

...It's...

...Nothing?...

...I hear it again!

...It is coming closer...

...Is it really the sound of death?

...It is even closer now...

...It's.....It's...

...NOOAAGGHHhhh.....

.....

...

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsApocalypse

And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.

- Genesis 7:17

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Apocalypse

It is only upon a rare occasion, a rare occasion such as this, that the always-serene waters of my spirit are disturbed. How often, I must ask, is it that one is truly blessed with the foresight of apocalyptic events, yet is cursed with being unable to reverse them?

I am indeed in the midst of such a situation. I and Zedekiah have discovered, over time, through unexpected visions and certain physical evidence, that the entire world will fall into inevitable apocalypse. This apocalypse will come in the form of great shifting of the earth's plates, and a tidal wave that will engulf half the planet's surface.

Yes, Zedekiah and I had been sharing many of the same visions of earthquake and great storm and tidal wave. Yet, inexplicably, two of our visions differed greatly. What exactly those extraneous visions mean, we are yet unsure of, but I am sure that they are important.

Zedekiah has told me of his recurring vision of entering hot, erupting, caverns underneath an area about the size of a city block, whose opening is located behind our hometown's general store. The opening itself, as Zedekiah has described it, is just large enough for a single person to walk down into. Somehow, as Zedekiah has also mentioned, inside the opening is not a steep fall, but a smooth slope that one could walk down normally, if only one possessed the courage to brave the high temperatures, which supposedly feel to be in excess of 100 degrees! He has also explained to me that in this vision, his mission is always to exploit the weak spots created by the shifting and try to open up the underground. Could it be to help restore balance to a world that is losing it?

The recurring vision I have that Zedekiah doesn't is not much different from his in its purpose. I see myself walking through the same area that Zedekiah tells me the underground caverns are located. However, every time, I just keep on walking westward, with the intent to reach the high school. We have previously only speculated upon the meaning of this vision in particular, even though I know that it must have some relation to our other visions.

We can only speculate on many of these visions, even though it has been some weeks since they began. What is evident in these visions, however, is the definite destruction that is portrayed. As of late, we have seen signs that some of our visions are accurate. Using the latest technology, weather centers around the world began picking up strange yet disturbing readings about storms to come and possible shifts in the earth's crust.

Even today, a certain apocalypse has been predicted in our forecast, which, of course, leads me to my current mindset. Yet, what of our remaining two visions, of the caverns, and my own trek? What place do they truly hold? As I think upon it more and more, I find that those visions may represent events that Zedekiah and I must play out, regardless of how much good it may do. The true meaning of all of this we still yet have to decipher, but I suppose that no one is meant to completely understand events that take place on such a grand scale, at least, not in this lifetime.

Even so, now is the time that I must stop pondering such things and set about an effort, of some sort, to do what I

Apocalypse continued

possibly can to help. Truly, are Zedekiah and I helpless, and will we be thrown into excruciating circumstances? Is our world falling hopelessly into the certain apocalypse, as described by the Book of Revelations, or, however, can we use our foresight to make our fate for ourselves? Is knowledge truly power? The answer, I would like to believe, is yes!

Yes, I have now convinced myself of what it is I must do. I will have to move now. Must I lock up my house upon leaving? Will it still be here when everything is done? I will lock up just in case...

I suppose that I must take that route behind the general store. This is going to be the longest one mile's walk I will have ever experienced, for it appears that the apocalypse itself is on the horizon.

How horrifying! Even as I continue to walk, and all the while look on into the distance, I see a wave approaching along the entire line of the horizon. It is as if the wave is so huge and overwhelming, that one can see it, even from this far away! It must have taken half this continent by now!

Even the ground is rumbling, sounding like Mother Earth's great belly growling beneath my feet! Could it mean the opening up of the caverns? Could the shifting of the geological plates throughout the world be the cause for such a grand upheaval of tidewaters? Could the part Zedekiah plays in his vision be a part of a possible solution? Hmm...

...I do appear to be nearing the very site of the opening to the caverns that Zedekiah foretold. Yes, this is the same area, yet the opening to the caverns has not yet appeared! Maybe it is not yet the time...Time is of the essence, however. I must continue, for the wave does grow closer! I must continue towards the high school, as in my vision. Many people would be using the high school as a disaster shelter by now. Zedekiah should also be there, for me to meet and return to this area with...

...Is that why my parents insisted that I stay and watch over the house as they went to the high school? Did my father know something that I didn't at that moment? Yes, maybe he knew the meaning of the visions Zedekiah and I had discussed with him. Even I myself am discovering the importance of carrying out these visions, faithfully...

...I am almost there now! I must search for Zedekiah and return to the caverns. Hopefully, the caverns will have opened up by then...

...Now then, the mile is up, and I have reached the all-important destination. Can I, however, find the one who seems to form the other half of the solution of this geological puzzle? I must diligently search the campus...

Even here in the school library, there is a great bustle of frustration. People are telling me that the apocalypse is on, that it has already begun. I know it, indeed I do. Zedekiah is not here, however...Where could he be?

...Ah! There he is, walking from the northeast building! He seems to have just left that building to begin looking for me. I will meet with him as I walk back downtown...We shall soon see to the caverns... Indeed, I would rather not leave so many people to certain destruction, yet Zedekiah tells me that he tried to convince as many people as he could of the truth of his vision and the safety of the solution provided therein, but no one would

Apocalypse continued

believe him...

...The ground has begun its terrible shaking once again, as we have begun approaching the area of the caverns! Yes, we can see it! The very foundation of the area is shifting. An opening is forming in the fashion that Zedekiah described, yet with an amazing show of flying dirt and lava and no small amount of rising steam! Now is the time to make a difference! Zedekiah must play his part.

Surely, as much as I would like to lend a helping hand, I know that I cannot at this point. Zedekiah tells me even now that he must go under, because he is the only one that knows the caverns well enough. I shall bid him luck in his work underground, for all I can now do is play the part of a spectator in the ongoing apocalypse...

He is working quickly! I must stand back, for he is working on the weak spots and making lava rise to the surface! He is kicking in the weaker foundations of dirt so that when the lava comes past those points, the intense heat weakens them even more, and the combined effect of melting and gravity makes them collapse. In turn, the lava further reveals itself as it rises above the falling ground. It has also become quite hot in the immediate area...Hmm...

...Oh no, the wave! In my focus, I had somehow forgotten! It draws... even...nearer...It...It...It is rising over me!! This is the end!!!
.....

...I'm...I'm still...alive?

The impact of the wave must have been lessened somehow. Yes, I noticed before that the rising lava did heat up the ground and the surrounding airspace intensely! Therefore, as the wave came down, that same intensity of heat in the air and along with the great heat of the rising lava instantaneously vaporized a good portion of the wave. The rest of the wave would have been cushioned and broken apart by the thick layer of vapor. The rest of the water will have either trailed off by now, or it would have continued to vaporize in the ensuing lava. Yes, the water does seem to have cooled and hardened the lava itself! It is good that it all happened quickly, however, or I would have been drowned!

Oh, that does remind me - what of Zedekiah? Yes, he knew of a secret corner within the caverns in which to shield himself from the great heat and lava. He should have freed himself from those caverns while I was blacked out...

...Speak of the devil! I do behold Zedekiah driving by in a pickup! I will catch a ride with him so that we may survey how much damage was truly done by the fated tidal wave.

Zedekiah and I were indeed saved by our faith in the visions given to us by a greater force. Knowledge truly is power! However, I must still wonder how widespread the beneficial effect of the underground caverns was. Yes, all's well that ends well, but I have a feeling that all of this is not yet over, and that this apocalypse was just a part of a greater plan. I believe that it was a sign of the end times. We must all be ready, for the Lord Christ hath said that he will come like a thief in the night to those of us that are unprepared...

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. - Hebrews 11:1

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsFate

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. - Psalms 23:4

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Fate

Death in and of itself is altogether a rather natural incident. However, it was the circumstances surrounding the death of the old man that make it not only all the more intriguing, yet also necessitate inspection by other people who may solve its mystery - and the curse laid upon that very house in which it happened.

Yes, there has been a curse upon this house and family estate in the back parts of Charleston, South Carolina for many years. Even though many of the finer details of how this curse was put upon this place have been largely forgotten and the rest of them subtly changed from generation to generation by word-of-mouth, the very motive was brought about by slaves in the Civil War era who retaliated against their evil owners by way of ancient rites.

Those who were then slaves were very spiritual and were very forthright about not being violent; an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. They called upon the spirits to bring the wrath of justice upon those who oppressed them. What the curse entailed upon the family of slave-owners and their estate is that not only the entire family but also all succeeding generations would each die a dark and painful death, and their property would curse anyone else who tried to alleviate the mystery of the spirits bound to it.

Even recently, in June of 1997, the last surviving member of the fourth generation since the Civil War era has succumbed to the house's animated plague of death. Over time while living out his days in the house, he slowly began to accept the fate that was prescribed to him because of evils long gone, evils that he did not personally indulge in.

Finally, on that fateful evening, the storm was unusually strong and the night let on layers of darkness that seemed devoid of any natural light. He felt a premonition of death, which was like unto the heightened awareness that one may have when in moments of danger or the vicinity of death itself. Silently he yet sat in that old, dusty chair in the study, with his legs crossed, while peering out of the large window, stroking his long gray beard, contemplating what he knew would come in due time that very night.

Finally, he reached for the lighter in his pocket and lit the candle on the table next to him. He had decided to leave behind not just the estate, but also his last words. He began to write a letter for whomever would come upon the property and find an old man lying quietly and peacefully in his chair, fated to never speak another word except in the realm of spirits.

Yes, he took pen and paper and wrote his last letter. The paper, like the rest of the house, and even the man himself, was old and worn down and decrepit, from great age and neglect. Also, the language used in the letter was somewhat archaic and difficult to read, yet was rich and descriptive, and drifted off into the dark wonder and mystique of the spiritual curse upon the house and its last, ill-fated inhabitant.

Even as he finished his letter and placed the pen back on the table, a fierce backdraft of tormenting wind wooshed the window open. The wind also instantaneously snuffed the candle's flame, as if to foreshadow the snuffing out of the old man by way of inherited curse. The gray old man was startled, and quickly fixed

Fate continued

his glare out the window, even though the wind had just as quickly settled down to a smooth, flowing whisper, that peacefully played at the acquiescent curtains. The pitter-patter of dancing rain continued its frolicking out in the yard, as if in righteous indignation.

A false alarm, perhaps? A moment later, an arm of lightning lashed out and struck the ground about 100 feet away from the house. In the ensuing flash and the seemingly immediate crack of thunder, a dark figure that roughly resembled the shape of a man, standing upright, could be seen standing within ten feet of the window.

So dark was this figure, silhouetted against the bright flash, that only the outline could be made out. The distinguishing feature, however, was the pair of cold, crimson eyes that shone brightly and gazed down into the soul of the fearless old man staring back.

Indeed, Death's Head had appeared in an instant, and disappeared along with the lightning. In yet another instant, lightning cracked again, this time striking the ancient, gnarled tree about 50 feet away from the house. In the ensuing flash, the old man could be seen sitting perfectly still...with blood slowly creeping from a deep, yet perfectly measured slit across his neck. The rain also continued to pour, as the light continued to fade, as even the large, 250-year old oak continued to burn down...

Whether by happenstance or strange twist of fate, the old man's longtime friend came to visit the next day, only to find him sitting coldly, yet peacefully in his chair. Out of momentary shock, nary a thought came to the mind of this now-troubled friend. In the next moment, with tears in his eyes, he whispered silent prayers, that his dead friend's soul could find respite, for it had been released from the mortal body tied to the cursed estate.

After his solitary mourning, the old friend glanced over to the table upon which his late companion had written many letters. There he noticed the old man's final letter, which he immediately walked to and read. The old man's companionship and good will shall not go in vain, thought the old friend. Indeed, could the curse now be lifted, now that the final family member was gone?

The old friend left everything as he found it and took his story to the police station. Even as he was telling them of the estate's supernatural curse, the police were becoming suspicious of his credibility. They quickly dismissed him as an old-fashioned, superstitious old man.

Having no luck with the police, he visited the local private detective nearby. For the second time, the old friend told his story and described the nature of the supernatural curse, while hoping that this time he would be believed. The detective promised the old friend that he would give the scene a look-over and determine if it was simply a petty thief who burglarized the house and murdered the old man. He also assured the old friend that the curse, if it even existed, would not take anyone else.

The old friend certainly hoped so. He and the detective shook hands and went their separate ways. The old friend suffered a fatal heart attack that evening. Two glowing eyes could be seen outside his window at the very moment of the heart attack...

Fate continued

As for the detective, he had decided from the very start that the old friend's story had been far too outlandish and superstitious to believe. It was thusly that he did not even bother to waste the effort of calling the coroner and the police squad to escort him to the house to investigate. He figured that he would simply give the place a look-over, as he had promised, and decide later if the scene was worth taking the time to even write up the report for.

That same night, on his own time, the detective approached the house, with flashlight in hand. He was hoping to "re-create the crime scene", and determine the order of events that had transpired the night before. Even as he approached the house, a thunderstorm was coming in and growing in strength quite rapidly, which also made the scene rather similar to the way it was the previous night.

The detective let himself in. He came upon the "murder scene" almost immediately. From the window peering out into the yard, he observed the burned-down oak, and the angry storm, with its sharp, stinging rain, tempestuous winds, and an occasional flash of lightning off in the distance.

As he turned towards the interior of the room, he received the startling sight of the old man lying peacefully in his chair. What further puzzled his usually cold, calculating, factual mind was the fact that there were no marks of struggle anywhere. For such a deep slit in a man's throat to be so perfectly measured, the murderer would have to have been immensely strong, well trained, and fast. It almost seemed that the murderer could not have been human, the detective thought, or the agonizing pain of receiving such a cut would cause even the most peaceful of men to fight back.

To add even more fuel to the fire of his curiosity, he noticed the letter that the old friend had mentioned. The detective took slow steps over to the table and pointed the flashlight towards the letter. He read it word for word, over and over. The letter had actually only helped to confound him even more.

The detective then decided that he was becoming overly superstitious. Settling back into the calm resignation that is typical of a detective, he proceeded to carefully study the window. He began to consider that window as a possible entry route for a burglar on such a dark and stormy summer night.

He placed his flashlight upon the left arm of the chair where the old man sat peacefully. The flashlight began to go dim and fade out altogether, as the detective had forgotten to replace the batteries. The timing couldn't have been worse, he thought.

Just as soon as he had finished that thought, the lightning struck about 100 feet away from the house. The thunder cracked fiercely, and in the instant of the lightning's flash, he caught a glimpse of an outline of a man out in the yard, silhouetted against the lightning. A pair of cold, crimson eyes shone brightly and gazed down into the soul of the detective.

Once again, Death's Head had appeared, and disappeared along with the lightning. Also with the lightning went the cool bravado of the detective. All of the detective's fear welled up within his throat, his entire body became tense, and he knew that he had just taken his last breath.

The lightning quickly lashed out again, this time 50 feet away from the house. In that instant the detective could be seen lying on the floor, with blood slowly creeping from a deep, yet perfectly measured slit across his neck. The curse had claimed its final victim...

Fate continued

"June 8, 1997

To any man that may find me here in my final respite:

'Tis in this gothic gateway to dark death that I sit and await my final moments, and my deliverer unto the fate of that which is Beyond. Yes, it is an ancient, inherited curse laid upon the house's very foundation. This house is cursed from the basement to the chimney's tip, and remains so until the end of time because of bloody evils which I did not personally commit. Even upon the family lineage has the curse been placed. It has finally been handed down to me, like unto a form of spiritual collateral issue.

I yet carry those stains, those century-old aftereffects of evil oppression, inherited by way of my bloodline. Every man shall meet his fate as it is given to him, and it is this that I do finally accept. I shall, however, continue my spiritual longsuffering, and try my hand at peace in those greater realms of the soul.

However, I pray that ye gentle yet unfortunate visitor would not meet the same fate as I, but that ye would leave as you came and seek out your own fate. I beseech you to tarry here no longer than needs be, in order that the anomalous spirits that rule this accursed gateway to darkest death woldst still allow you to yet walk away with your breath and life. Take only your memory of this place with you, and pray that my soul would find the eternal peace that it has been so longing for, outside of this cursed body and this wretched estate.

And now, I, for what I know shall be my last moments on this plane of existence, shall go into death with calm expectation. I await he who has conquered in death and written in blood."

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsNowheres and Dreamscapes

I love to walk when the day is gone
Beneath the star-set ev'ning sky,
Where I can talk with God alone
And feel His sacred presence nigh.

When I have laid my humbled soul
In full submission at his feet,
My sinful burdens from me roll
And leave His victory complete.

- Hugh Buckner Johnston,
The Peace of God

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Nowheres and Dreamscapes

Standing on the doorway of existence, we can behold a dimension of ordered chaos, immeasurable depth, and odd, ethereal, otherworldly beauty. We are entering that transitory place for the spirit. As we step through, the gateway folds and closes on itself, and blinks out, as if it had never existed. As we stop for a moment to look around and take in the new environment, the spiritual tide continues to ebb and flow.

Even the dreamy patterns of colors and hues of the surreal ground that they stand on change in a continual flow. It may remind one of the effects of a multi-faceted disco globe, except that the patterns of colors seem to become almost the entire dimension. One string of colors is the warp for the other's weft. It is a yarn woven by the magic that finds its home here. The full glory of the phantasmagoria of color is indescribable, and beyond the league of even the glory of a rainbow magnified a thousand times.

Beyond even the colors was the scale of the dimension as a whole. Being a realm beyond necessary physicality, the dreamscape has no borders. The many objects and scenery continually become greater in number, as the magic of the dimension is further utilized.

The scenery itself is quite beautiful, even though it is in constant change by way of people dreaming all around the world, and also the nature of the spiritual and magical tide. The scenery is rich and wondrous nonetheless, with every kind of landscape imaginable taking form as we continue to look further into the distance of this seemingly endless realm called the dreamscape.

Beyond even the scenery and its countless treasures are the sensations that are to be felt and experienced. Even just standing in the dreamscape, one becomes lost, or perhaps found, in a swirling universe of overwhelming sensations, that ebb and flow with the rest of the dimension. These sensations become a state of being. One will find oneself a part of the dreamscape, and hence part of an evolving, fully realized, dream. For the living, it is the cross-space between the physical and spiritual dimensions. It is also the crossroads for countless dimensions...Hence the grand visions people have when having a near-death experience. What people see and feel in a near-death are quite real. They begin to cross the space between the physical and spirit realms, and therefore see beyond just their own existence.

As people dream, the concerns and worries and fears that have sunk down to the subconscious may find a place here where they will become manifest. As there must be many dimensions, whose realms I cannot even begin to fathom, that are linked to the dreamscape, I imagine that it is more than possible for the mind and soul to enter a dimension whose characteristics do indeed seem to be subconscious concerns made real.

The River of the Soul, as it continues to flow through the myriad realms of God's great universe, encompasses all the magic and all the dreams that make life worth living. All one has to do to find this magic and realize these dreams is open our minds to the spirit. We should not search within only our spirits to find the answers to our questions about the cosmos, but we should also look to the Holy Spirit of the cosmos itself, our Divine Creator.

It is indeed truly amazing how even the smallest things fit

Nowheres and Dreamscapes continued

into the great puzzle and the big picture of the cosmos. Indeed, everything, in its own way, is significant. The River of the Soul, with its many tributaries, flows in so many ways. Truly, God is everything and eternity, and from His word is everything and eternity created. One could say that, because of this, nothing ever begins. Therefore, nothing ever ends. There are yet many stories to be told, however, even though they do make up part of such an eternity. Yes, many stories there are, great adventures such as this. Everything and every story is significant, for they all are a part of the whole.

Let us search now along the path of dreams for the gateway to the Nowhere dimension. Our thoughts are quickly received by the dreamscape and manifested as swirling strands of living energies. The energies then unleash some of the magic of the dreamscape, which then summons up a door, as if out of nowhere! Even nowhere is a point in space! Even nowhere is somewhere! Everything is a part of infinity.

Like travelers setting foot in an unfamiliar land, we must stand and take in our surroundings for a few seemingly timeless moments. Let us breathe deeply, as thoughts of adventure run through our minds and feelings of excitement fill our hearts. For a dimension in-between physical and spiritual, it is captivating.

It seems to be diametrically opposed to the dreamscape in its concept. It is just one flat dimension, representing only itself, over and over. Some would say it is an anomaly of creation. Of course, we know better. The magic of the spirit makes everything possible!

This place seems to demonstrate the mathematical concept of a plane. There is about a square mile of landscape that continuously and infinitely repeats itself, as if planned that way. A compass would be useless in this place. Nowhere has become a very real somewhere. Even "nowhere" is a point in space. We are not where we were before, but somewhere else, in this elsewhere of some strange creator's imagination.

This nowhere would also be difficult to map. A map has limits, boundaries, and definitions. Here, these are harder to find. That makes it easy to get lost here. There isn't much to get lost among here, however, as everything repeats itself. We could walk any distance in any direction, and get nowhere at all.

In that way, we would always be in the "middle of nowhere". The very idea of time is also rendered useless. There is no change here but the drops of infinite apples from infinite apple trees, swaying of the ubiquitous wind, the swimming of infinite fish in infinite ponds, and the shining rays of an invisible magic sun that lights this plane.

Let us travel to the closest tree. It is not small, being about 20 feet in circumference. Its bark strangely resembles that of a pear tree, but its shape and leaves yet resemble those of a weeping willow. The sight of it swaying in the wind under a cloudless blue sky and amidst sparse yet well-laid out shrubbery is thought provoking, to say the least.

Yet, lo and behold, there is fruit upon its branches! It seems that the Nowhere dimension does provide for not only the mind and introspection, but also for the body and bare necessities! It is obvious that this dimension was planned ahead,

Nowheres and Dreamscapes continued

and well in advance!

This is the way that the many pages in the Book of Destiny turn, the way that the innumerable streams of the River of the Soul flow. In the end of one adventure we find the beginning of another. They are all connected in the Book of Destiny, the River of the Soul.

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsLife

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Life

The Holy Spirit, whose grace knows no bounds, gives freely of its knowledge to any mind and heart that will believe and love Him and His only begotten Son, Whom He gave to us, that we might be saved. The knowledge and wisdom given through the spirit gives true sight to the closed eye of the mind, and gives true hearing to the deaf ear of the heart. In this new infusion of life and spirit, a whole life is transformed and given new meaning. God gives to us new life, out of His boundless love for us. God gives to us wonderful new dreams to live out. Such a joy it is to **work** for the Lord!

That is not to say it will be any easier; there will always be struggles while we are in this world. Yet, we must remember that God has put us here to teach and chastise us, as any good father would. We must remain steadfast in our faith in and love for God and one another, as we rely on God to help us, and do according to His will.

Indeed, there are many things that a believer has to go through to succeed in this world. Fortunately, all we have to do to succeed in Heaven is believe and love. It's a sad, bitter fact that the world does not, and can not, boast such a thing, for the world is given to human nature, to the weakness of the flesh. This weakness is the beginning of our problems, as temptation and cruel emotions are often hard to resist acting upon.

Truly, those who listen only to the flesh are foolish and ignorant. There are many temptations hurled upon it by the forces of evil, the dark beings in constant spiritual war with the forces of good, to gain way into your soul. Since almost the Beginning, it has been such ignorance that has caused unending strife for the believers and the workers of the faith. Too many times, people envy, fear, even hate what is different from them, or what they do not understand.

The most notable example of this, of course, was the life of Christ, God's only Son. Any worldly-minded person would look down upon His life, calling it poor and without much means. Yes, Christ was born in a manger, but of what use is such a fact in determining a man's worth, especially a man such as Jesus? Jesus was neither poor, nor without means, for God always provided all He needed to fulfill His task. He would provide for us as well if we would have faith, and be willing to put in time and effort.

Nonetheless, it was even His own people that crucified Him upon the cross. Yet, Jesus touched more lives than any other man could ever hope to. In life, Jesus worked many great miracles, and healed many people. Any lost person willing to open their hearts was won over by His beautiful messages about God's boundless grace and love. In death, Jesus gave Himself for us, that we might live. Yes, there is unending beauty in not only God's Word, but also His acts of love. It is the example of Christ that we should always look up to and try to live up to.

We must always remember that the enemy is not the person standing in front of us, but the principalities and powers that rule this world. We must keep our wits, and our faith, about us in our battles for good, and God will make sure that we win, for He has conquered this world, indeed, the entire cosmos, already. God Himself is our greatest ally, and is always ready to provide for any in need. All we have to do is believe, and do His will with dedication and love and truth. To believe in God and give

Life continued

yourself unto Him and His great kingdom of the spirit is to know that all of your battles are already won! All of this, and then Heaven to look forward to! Who else could ask for more in life? Let us praise God for all He has given us!

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.
- Matthew 6:20-21

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsPart II:Necrophony

And the angel that was sent unto me, whose name was Uriel, gave me an answer,

And said, Thy heart hath gone too far in this world, and thinkest thou to comprehend the way of the Most High? Then said I, Yea, My Lord. And he answered me, and said, I am sent to shew thee three ways, and to set forth three similitudes before thee:

Whereof if thou canst declare me one, I will shew thee also the way that thou desirest to see, and I shall shew thee from whence the wicked heart cometh.

And I said, Tell on, My Lord. Then said he unto me, Go thy way, weigh me the weight of the fire, or measure me the blast of the wind, or call me again the day that is past.

- 2 Esdras 4:1-5

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsNecrophonyTraveler's Tale

O that the fleeting joys of life might last:
Too soon the future shall have been the past!
Would that the sands of time might be reversed,
And all the pleasant paths again traversed!

- Hugh Buckner Johnston,
In Retrospection

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Traveler's Tale

The darkening and destruction of Earth and all other living worlds by the dark demon has long been prophesied. Luke Sergestus and I, Kaine Democles, have been trained secretly from birth in the ways of old by the spirit of the elder Anacros Rozna'Il, to stop the foul fiend. We are adamant in our quest to bring about an end to the evil incarnate's plan of total domination by darkness and death personified. The darkness will plant its seeds of unlife throughout nature so as to trap humankind in its web of rotting undeath, its Theater of Cacophonies, its Hell on Earth.

That must not be; Luke and I, with strength of soul and purity of heart, have taken the responsibilities upon ourselves to unsheathe the Sword of Justice. Instrumental in our quest will be the all-important Book of the Knowledge of the Eldritch Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy. Contained within it is the wisdom that will enable us to wield the magic powerful enough to re-imprison this anomalous spirit in the very same Abyss where it was long ago imprisoned, thusly renewing the balance of good and evil.

That is not to say that our quest will be easy. Also according to prophecy, the foul fiend will flee from us when its defeat seems near: and it will retreat through a magical portal to another world, to which we must follow it. Therefore, from the outset we must be completely prepared.

To falter means to doom the world and hand it over to the evil forces buried deep in the world's heart. This is not just any human war where it wouldn't matter to the Big Picture if Luke and I died in action; the success of this mission and the fate of this world and all others hang on our survival. Essentially, we will either heal the world or curse it. These are heavy ponderings indeed...

After we succeed, if we succeed, perhaps there will be more time to reflect on these events. For now, however, Luke and I must prepare for the coming onslaught, this Storm on the Horizon. We must travel lightly, lest we confront the Evil and must quickly do battle; we will carry little more than what will be necessary and nothing that would slow down our progress. Also, I shall keep this diary close to me throughout our journey and write of our experiences during our dire quest. I will use custom parchment and a waterproofed pen, both of which can withstand the elements well enough for this adventure.

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June 26th, 2012

We are now almost completely ready to meet this incredible undertaking. We must now don the Armor of Courage and hoist the Shield of Faith. Following is a list of our quest's necessities:

- ~Vitamin and mineral tablets
- ~Assorted canned foods
- ~Water jugs
- ~Sleeping bags
- ~4 ponchos (2 small, 2 large)
- ~A hand-ax
- ~Matches, lighters, torch-making materials
- ~Flashlights and extra batteries
- ~Magically-empowered swords

Traveler's Tale continued

~Book of the Knowledge of the Eldritch Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy

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June 29th, 2012

We have been journeying now for a number of days. The Evil's darkness has started the first step in its potent conquest of life and unlife, of death and undeath. Its changes are coming about rapidly, and fortunately for us, its "seeds of evil" are quite obvious.

We have encountered and at times even had to battle more than once the aftereffects of our enemy's passing through. When it has possessed an animal, the eyes turn a glowing red. From our direct encounters with the Evil, we have found that it possesses an animal for a certain period of time. When the animal becomes full of living, loathsome evil, the Evil itself will depart for its next victim, leaving its previous victim with just enough residue of living darkness to control the animal.

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June 29th 2012

The Evil seems to be systematically cursing the Earth, slowly at first. I suggested that time is of the essence if we are going to stop it before it truly begins. Luke suggested that the Future is an Undiscovered Country!

As I was saying, the Evil's aftereffects are easy to spot. It becomes evident what path the dark antagonist took, not just through changes in the surroundings, but also by traces of anomalous "darkness" and evil magic residues left behind. Also, there have been many times we have been able to heal any affected animals and surroundings that may have been cursed. However, while we don't want to ever ignore an animal's situation, time is still of the essence.

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According to the old scrolls, the Darkness is an anomalous spirit that was long ago cursed to the Abyss, a place of depth and darkness beyond black. The bonds of non-existence broke, and the Evil eventually realized consciousness. In the deepest part of its infinite dark, it knows it is not a god, and has to build its power slowly by transforming the world to its own ends. We must not allow it to reach critical mass...

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We primarily move about during the day, as the Evil is easier to spot out then. Even with our keen senses, it gets very difficult to spot utter darkness when it becomes part of utter darkness. At night, we set up camp, and eat a rather modest dinner. We also take turns guarding the immediate surroundings throughout the night until dawn, at which time we have breakfast and resume our journey to find the Evil.

Luke and I realize that we simply do not have the power to completely destroy the Dark One. The fact that it is feeding off the same darkness and undeath that it creates is making our mission that much harder. Even so, we make progress each day. The Evil becomes weaker after every direct fight with us. We are also using our magic to help stunt its growth as we struggle to find and weaken it enough to seal it off for good.

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Traveler's Tale continued

Since the whole world's fate now depends on us, things that I used to take for granted have become far away, and things that were formerly insignificant details are suddenly glorious in their design. An example of that came in the form of today's awe-inspiring sunset...Will Luke and I live to see another? Will anyone else?

Alas, duty beckons, as the last watch for tonight is almost over. Dawn will be here in a matter of time; there is a shade of brightness on the horizon. I must awaken Luke so that we can both prepare for the coming day.

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Before, I mentioned how Luke and I heal the animals and the landscape that the Evil has affected. I will describe here how we work our magic to do so, but not disclose all the actual secrets thereof, nor the secrets of the rest of all existing magic. To heal the animals, we cast the sacred spell of "Heal", which reverses any ill effects caused by an outside source. To return the landscape to the condition it was in before the Evil passed through, we used the sacred spell of "Reverse", which simply reverses the effects of spirits or magic. Reverse has no effect on natural physical aging. It takes an incredibly skilled wizard in command of prodigious magical power and high level spells to lessen aging, or reverse it altogether.

Regarding the effects of the Evil on the landscape: When it passes through, the Evil will use some of its dark power to twist the immediate environment into a dark distortion of its former self. Some leftover, "dark", magical residue is left in the Evil's wake. Just the power of the evil emanating from the dark antagonist seems to be enough to damage its surroundings. The dark one obviously wants to tailor all facets of the world to its dark desires.

When the Evil possesses an animal and injects living, evil darkness into it, the animal's behavior becomes altogether violent. Not unlike a person that has given over to the dark side, the possessed animal will seek no end in doing harm. (It is fortunate that the dark one has not had the opportunity to conquer any humans as yet!) Fortunately, Luke and I can reverse these effects with our aforementioned magic. However, our magic is not as simple as saying, for instance, "Heal" or "Reverse". In order to unlock the ability for magic, one has to go through many years of mystical training, and has to learn the skillful harnessing of these magical powers. To cast a spell, one has to know the spell inscription needed and any incantations that may also be required. Words are powerful indeed, especially when there is a powerful belief behind them.

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It is obvious that we are making definite progress in our mission. We are successfully tracking down and confronting the Evil more often and can just as often hinder its own progress as well. Our training in combat was well worth it, as our fighting and magic abilities complement each other very well.

We will focus more now on stopping the Evil first, and fixing environmental damage afterwards. We're going straight for the source first, in other words. Even today Luke and I had another direct conflict with the Evil. I remember it and the events that led up to it quite vividly. We had been on its trail for quite a while. We would have attempted an assault on it sooner, but we

Traveler's Tale continued

would not have been able to do much damage or even slow it down much.

We kept on its trail, staying as incognito as possible, trying to keep out of the range of its senses (which, we have found, is quite far!) while we pooled our magical reserves. At one point, we cloaked ourselves in a fog of tightly controlled dark magic, as a stealth tactic. Only the most skillful of magic users can attempt such a strategy and withstand the onslaught of dark temptations set forth by those who control the greater external resources of dark magic.

Besides our strategic use of magic, we were also trying to find a way to "sneak up" on our enemy. As fate would have it, just as we were about to give that up, we observed the Evil possess one of a group of cranes in an open, well-lighted area nearby. A crane didn't seem to be much of a challenge and the Evil had just stuck itself in one. We were able to tell the Evil from the other cranes immediately; the eyes were the familiar glowing red.

Upon observing the Evil one's approach of the cranes, we picked up and were within fighting range quickly. It was time to take an opportunity to do great damage to the foul fiend. The Evil had, however, more than noticed us as we came within reach; it had already begun making its move. Fortunately, the cranes seemed to sense the incredible concentration of evil, or maybe felt that tension in the air that often comes before a fight, and kept a good distance away. That meant more room to fight in, and also, the other cranes wouldn't get hurt.

The fight commenced as Luke and I unsheathed our swords. The Evil began flapping violently the wings at its disposal. It was trying to keep us away in order to set us up for a dive attack, which we figured out quickly, as it tore through the air at a speed that I've never seen a crane travel!

With deftness and agility, Luke and I dodged and retaliated. The fight ended quickly, with Luke and I plunging our swords into the body of the crane. Blood started flowing, and the eyes turned back to their normal color. Fortunately, we were able to repair the crane's wounds soon after the encounter.

Even so, we were already draining off some of the Evil's dark magic via sacred incantations and magic, as the dark antagonist was freeing itself from the crane. Also, the sacred magic that empowered our swords allowed their great mettle to literally cut into the dark one's spirit.

Even though we hadn't managed to pool enough power to weaken the Evil enough to re-imprison it, that confrontation seriously handicapped it. It is a "higher form of existence", but it isn't a god. Indeed, either Luke or I alone cannot stop it, but as a team it can be done.

As we watched the Evil quickly float across the landscape in orb form, there were no doubts between us that we can keep up with it, and eventually re-imprison it. We began to realize that it is just a matter of time.

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Here ends the journal of Kaine Democles. Follow the path of fate with Kaine and Luke if you dare, and join them on the rest of the journey to destroy the darkness...Their battle on Earth will be continued!

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsLegend of Verdantia

i.

Across the Stygian depths I set sail
 For the Halls of Abandonment
 Where the theories of life fail;
 My malignant quest was hell-sent.

ii.

From the shores of Necropolis
 I view endless ruination
 Circling the Castle of Abyss
 Where dwell many an aberration.

iii.

These dark denizens, full of hate,
 Are encroachingly hell-bent,
 But death this day is not my fate;
 My victory is Heaven-sent.

iv.

That ferocious foundation,
 Amidst a somber stench of death,
 Sits in silent celebration
 Of its chance to end my breath.

v.

On reaching the Rooms of Ruin,
 My mettle must face the Great Fiend,
 In whose cauldron dark death's brewing;
 This wicked wizard I must end.

vi.

By the light of the Demon Moon
 I destroy these undead devils;
 With Godspeed I shall very soon
 Climb the castle's highest levels.

vii.

I have strongly stormed the evil halls;
 My holy might resists his spells;
 His vile blood stains ancient walls
 As my sword dooms him to dark hells.

Ethril Zyriphad's "Dirge for Dark Lord Azrafel",
 As translated from the long poem "Lays of Atlaetius"

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Legend of Verdantia

Once upon a time, as many other stories have begun, there was a young warrior with a bold heart and bold ways, always ready to fight against evil in his enchanted realm. Yes, like so many other stories, we have a hero who was just a young man who gained skill, knowledge, and fame even greater than what would have been expected of a great noble warrior such as himself. Even more so like so many magical stories that we have heard growing up, our hero's native enchanted realm of magick and sorcerere' takes the shapes of our many dreams and fantasies.

Well then, as we are all now a little older and a little wiser, and may have put off such stories and accepted the seeming realities of the sealed dome of existence around us that keep our hearts from venturing forth, we may ask the question: 'What significance does another story like this have?' An answer is there, for anyone with an adventurous spirit and a truly yearning mind. However, the quest and adventure to be found in the answering of the question will require that one has the soul of a warrior and the heart of a poet.

Yes, let us visit the realm of our aforementioned hero, and stay a while, that we may find its significance in the fact that it is close to our own. We may all have known this young hero, whose name is Ethril Zyriphad, at some time or another, or some way or another. He seems to be everything that many of us survivors' want to be. Let us get to know him a little better before we embark on the adventure to come!

His hair is that of a silken and arabesque design, and carries the color of a sunset long past, whose hues had such beauty that when impressed by happenstance upon the eyes of the ennuye' wanderer, it would be long remembered and even when memory fails, these shades of waning day would still verily be of familiar and fond feeling. His crystallic, azure eyes depict a depth unusual to one his youthful age. He is extraordinarily talented, yet still perfectly human. Even in his weaknesses, he yet possesses daunting energy and strength. He is full of spirit; he is a being of passion. One can feel his aura when he steps close. He is a man of conviction, yet also of balance.

Even though he is relatively young, many already praise and extol him, for his bravery and kindness. He earned these epithets by defeating the great wizard that had given his soul over to the darkness. In his munificence, he plans to leave for posterity his lustrous riches and treasure troves. He has also become an apprentice to the spirit of the great elder Anacros Rozna-II. Under his mentor, Ethril is taking up study and practice of the eldritch arts of alchemy, necromancy, sorcerer and the magicks of the elders.

Indeed, Ethril himself, not unlike his world, has led a brilliant life, and has a future that seems not yet set. Truly, to ensure that the forces of good keep the upper hand and that the forces of evil never dominate, Ethril, not unlike the rest of his people, must continue to strive. He must also continue to learn from the elder's spirit, that he might gain some knowledge from the past in order to help his realm shape its bright and fantastic future.

Come, join me, in an adventure throughout this beautiful land. Close your eyes and hope and imagine, and you are already halfway there. Let us now depart, and get to know its history, its

Legend of Verdantia continued

magic, its dimension parallel to ours, its aspirations...

Even now in this very realm of Verdantia, all of our fantasies and nightmares are made to exist. Some of the residents of this fantastic land seem to represent what it is many of us dreamers would like to be. No part, no consideration, no nook, no cranny of the human psyche and imagination has been left out!

There are yet many people and spirits, however, that have actually lived in and inhabited this realm and its own separate and very magical, enchanted dimension parallel to ours. Nonetheless, the hopes and dreams of dreamers influence its form. The wanton desires of evil occasionally gnaw at its flow of life force, if not to dismantle the life force altogether, in order to achieve its own dark ends.

There are yet many sources of evil. The most obvious source is those people whose motives are not entirely pure. These people would have dreams and hopes snuffed out altogether if they could just transform their willpower into sheer force. Even their hate and disgust for pure things is detrimental to the cause of good.

There are numerous spirits and great cosmic pools of darkness that influence these people. Given enough influence, these spirits and powers will take over and introduce a true loathing of the forces of good. There are even some spirits that are tapped into enough dark power that they can directly do their dirty deeds. Fortunately, each time evil rears its ugly head, great warriors rise from the ranks, and the people unite, in order to defeat the darkness and its servants.

Nonetheless, Verdantia has enjoyed a great history that has now lasted near a thousand years. It was in the year 998 A.D. of our world that its existence did begin, when the 7 Elders of Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy decided to call upon the greater external forces of light. The Elders asked them to find a dimension that was parallel to ours and imbue it with magical and spiritual properties. The Elders, upon discovering this dimension, use the full extent of their knowledge, as well as the deep wisdom and great power of the greater forces of light, to magically create a physical world there. This green world of supreme beauty they aptly named Verdantia. During the creation of the world, nearly all manner of Earth-like landscape, vegetation, and animal life were formed! They have indeed activated a realm that is "magically charged", and is therefore the only physical world that can manifest magick, where all of our good dreams of high fantasy can be made real and true!

In this way, they activated a realm where dreams could become physical. In the crossroads of the multi-faceted dreamscape, that transitory dimension that bridges the spiritual and physical, they placed a magical gateway. So well-formed was that gateway that human beings, while sleeping in midnight reverie as the subconscious worked its late-night duties, they could find this portal and visit the wonderful realm of Verdantia.

Truly, that which we most believe in settles down into the subconscious. Those beliefs hold there until such a time that we find these needs coming to life in our dreams. Even as the belief in and use of magick had already been deeply rooted in people's minds and hearts and souls for generations, this very same ancient magick also eventually rooted itself in their subconscious. Magick is indeed the belief in, knowledge of, and calling upon spiritual and natural forces.

That was not the only reason that the Elders created

Legend of Verdantia continued

Verdantia, however. By doing so, they helped to insure the fulfillment of the 1000-year prophecy, that of a loosed dark fiend and the mighty, magical warriors of two worlds that will re-imprison it. By bringing many willing people along with them, they settled the planet. They also carried with them their culture of knighthood, nobility, magick, and belief in God!

Nevertheless, they have made Verdantia a place that can help the people of Earth keep at least a subconscious memory of magick, even when they do not have an actual conscious belief in it. In this way, the Elders have created a place where not only a part of the 1000-year prophecy could be fulfilled, but also where the subconscious could go to keep its practice of magick, and help the mind truly keep a hold on dreams.

That, I know for sure, is where the subconscious' dreams got their name. That which we truly want deep down, becomes our dream, our ambition. It is kept intact, as the subconscious holds it dear. Held in dreams, whether waking or sleeping, are the belief of magick, and the magick of belief. That is the greatest form of magick!

That indeed is the essence of the realm of Verdantia! It helps keep up the belief in and use of magick. Magick and its use have been preserved thusly not only by our subconscious, but also by the very residents of Verdantia itself. It is this spiritual legacy that has continued and grown strong for so many, many generations now.

The elders themselves had been warriors. In our year of 1012 A.D., they forced that dark spirit into the dark dimension of non-existence, the Abyss, and forged an interdimensional lock. The dark one is an anomalous spirit of darkness and evil that knows no other purpose than to wreak havoc on entire worlds and ensnare them in its web of dark undeath. It is fortunate that the Elders rid all living worlds of this menace! However, being only human, they could only summon enough power and skill to make that magical seal last for 1000 years.

It is for this reason that the Elders have to pass down their knowledge, that the prophesied warriors will know how to re-imprison the dark fiend, and renew the lock. It is only then that the spirit of death and destruction will be truly imprisoned until Judgment Day, when it will be thrown into the lake of fire for its unending evil!

The coming warriors will have be strong and sure, and train hard in the ways of sorcere'. Most of all, however, they must have the belief of magick, and the magick of belief!

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsTale of Two Worlds

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Tale of Two Worlds

The cosmos has no beginning and no ending, and on the grand scale, the River of the Soul flows in all directions. To find the beginnings and causes of a story or an event, one could search down the mists of time endlessly investigating each happenstance as it pertains to the next.

However, in the cosmos, there is a grand plan at work, and some events unfolding therein are more related to one another than most. It is by this process of looking for the meanings of things and their closely related causes that we may find a sort of significance in individual stories.

Even with the story we are about to experience, this story of a young warrior preparing for the first battles of the War of Darkness, we must tread back down the pathways of time to gain a complete understanding. Let us now travel back to 938 A.D., in our world of Earth, in the country of England. This is a time when swords, sorcerers, chivalry, royalty, and walking in Jesus' footsteps are still at the heart of the culture and society. It is in this very year that the wheels of fate will start to turn, and set in motion events necessary for the forces of good to triumph.

It begins with the 7 Elders of the Eldritch Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy. Their names are Anacros Rozna-II, Rheocles Brimmenrod, Nestrichor Celestius, Thandricus Althenia, Jopharian Zyriphad, Odysseus Yonekdrezzin, and Chrysthenor Tyrrus. The 7 Elders have all learned their craft from the same mentor, and have become good friends during their schooling. They have all just finished learning their craft, and decided that they will continue to meet in the name of friendship, magick, all mankind, and the glory of God. Over the years, they meet regularly, at that most magical and mysterious of earthly places, Stonehenge. They always talk of life, politics, and of course, magick. Year after year, they plan their next activities, as well as work on new spells.

They serve the royal family and the people with unending passion, as well as unmatched skill in magick, honed through years of combined practice and discovery. After many years of helping the country through countless turmoils by way of their wisdom and wizardry, the sorcerers are appointed to be a Council of Elders, by the King and Queen themselves. A grand new era dawns in England! The Elders assist in making the use of magick commonplace, and also help the royal family strengthen the country in almost every way imaginable. The economy flourishes in a matter of only a decade. The year is 950 A.D., and England is in her prime!

Many years of prosperity follow. The prince and princess rise to the throne in the year of 990 A.D., and with them they bring their own views on magick. They believe that sorcerers are evil, and that those who practice it are evil also, because they "try to make themselves gods". Certainly, there are those men who have a greedy heart to begin with, and try to use wizardry to do just that. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth, when it comes to those sorcerers who use the power of the spirit in the name of God.

Nevertheless, the King and Queen knew that they could act

Tale of Two Worlds continued

upon their intentions only when they came to the throne. The King and Queen ordered all magick users to either renounce their practices in wizardry or leave the country, in one week. If anyone did not comply, he or she would be thrown into prison for life, or worse. The Elders were not willing to give up their craft, nor did they want to cause unrest among the people, which could possibly have resulted in a riot.

Realizing that there was no way to change the King and Queen's minds on the matter, the 7 Elders decided to leave England. Upon publicly announcing their decision, many people took their side. The Elders spread word that anyone that was willing could join them, that they could build a new culture of magick, knighthood, and nobility. By the time it came for the Elders to leave, they had a small army of followers!

Certainly, the King and Queen's actions seemed extreme and unwarranted, but many times we see leaders use their position to exert their own beliefs and political motives upon others. Nevertheless, it is these events that caused unrest among the people, which slowly built up to the crusades in the 12th century! So much for trying to prevent bloodshed! Not only that, stories of the 7 Elders and heroes in the crusades eventually inspired the legends of King Arthur, his Knights of the Round Table, and Merlin the magician!

At the moment, however, the year is 998 A.D. The Elders and their families, mounted upon their horses, have just stepped through their magick portal, a rip in the fabric of what we call reality, onto a remote island that they visited many years before. Their followers are not far behind! The Elders themselves begin to ponder on the future. Never before have they ever wanted to resort to peering through the mists of time, as they instead sought to ensure a good future by acting upon the present, sowing seeds of hard work, faith, and love.

Now, with the use of magick by future generations being threatened, they summon up their spells of prophecy. The spirits only reveal so much through the portals into which the Elders now peer into, however. The Elders discover that an age-old spirit, a ravager of all things living, will come to engulf all life on Earth in a few years. This evil spirit is an anomalous dark force that possesses any animals and taints any landscape it comes in contact with. Only humans, who possess the potential for great spiritual power levels, can truly fight this dark fiend.

The Elders know that they must imprison this dark force in a dark dimension of nonexistence called the Abyss. Long and hard they studied dimensions and magical seals when they were young, and their knowledge will soon save the world! However, even with their combined might, they could only gather enough power to make the dimensional lock last for 1000 years.

Knowing this, the Elders peer through the mist of ages once again. The spirits reveal to them a distant future where a few young men of two worlds that possess bravery, wisdom, youthful vigor, great strength of spirit, incredible belief in magick, and unending faith in God will learn powerful abilities in combat and

Tale of Two Worlds continued

magick. These great warriors, the necromantic spirits also tell, will re-imprison the dark fiend after it is loosed from its bonds. The all-seeing spirits even reveal the approximate locations of those whom they prophesy of.

The Elders create a plan that will insure that they can find these spirited young men when the time comes, and train them. The first step they take is requesting the greater external forces of light to find a dimension parallel to ours and imbue it with magical and spiritual properties. The Elders, upon discovering this dimension, use the full extent of their knowledge, as well as the deep wisdom and great power of the greater forces of light, to magically create a physical world there.

This green world of supreme beauty they aptly named Verdantia. During the creation of the world, nearly all manner of Earth-like landscape, vegetation, and animal life were formed! They have indeed activated a realm that is "magically charged", and is therefore the only physical world that can manifest magick, where all of our good dreams of high fantasy can be made real and true!

In the crossroads of the multi-faceted dreamscape, that transitory dimension that bridges the spiritual and physical, they placed a magical gateway. So well-formed was that gateway that human beings, while sleeping in midnight reverie as the subconscious worked its late-night duties, they could find this portal and visit the wonderful realm of Verdantia. In this way, they have made Verdantia a place that can help the people of Earth keep at least a subconscious memory of magick, even when they do not have an actual conscious belief in it.

In this way, the Elders have created a place where not only a part of the 1000-year prophecy could be fulfilled, but also where the subconscious could go to keep its practice of magick, and help the mind truly keep a hold on dreams.

The Elders then decide to "settle" Verdantia. They call a meeting of the people that followed them to the island. Telling them that there is a new, magical world that they can settle and continue their culture of knighthood, nobility, magick, belief in God, justice, hope, and love. As each person there wants to keep their way of living, they all volunteer. They take a day to gather their things and extra food. Once all preparations have been made, they mount their horses and create a grand portal through which they all step through into the new world.

Everyone has decided that they will colonize into 4 kingdoms, which will each be further divided into 4 areas. Each area is to be led by a "noble family". The 7 Elders and their families are to be the nobility of just as many areas. The others elect families to be the nobility in their respective areas.

Nevertheless, it will take much time and work to get everything set up. They must begin traveling to different areas first, making note of all sources of water and food along the way. Once people have settled, everyone can use their skills to build the new world's culture from the ground up.

All those who have been trained in the different areas of construction will gather the materials they need, and begin building the towns and noble houses. Those who are farmers will go

Tale of Two Worlds continued

about creating farms and the irrigation needed to bring water to them. All those who know the fine arts, such as sculpting and painting, begin on decorations, extra clothing, and pottery, among others. There are even artists that will paint glorious murals, as more and more buildings are finished! Many other people also have various trades, such as blacksmithing and teaching.

Indeed, the Elders have seen the prophecy, and are making it possible! They will let fate do the rest. Much time, time in abundance, would have to pass, knew the 7, before Earth's and Verdantia's Streams of Fate could finally meet as the inevitable battle drew near. The Elders would have been long dead by the time the blue and the green planets' warriors were even born. In light of this, they compiled their wisdom of magic into the Book of the Knowledge of the Eldritch Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy. It is from this book that the prophesied heroes will be taught from. This book will also serve as a means of preserving the knowledge of sorcere' throughout the ages.

Finally, in 1001 A.D., as Elder Anacros Rozna-II was nearing death, it was decided that his soul would return to Earth and Verdantia, in the same areas that the heroes were to be born and raised in, to recruit them for their training. The rest is history.

Owen Johnston's Journey ConceptsOutcast

Owen Johnston's Journey Concepts
Outcast

The River of the Soul continues to flow. It indeed continues to flow so many different ways for so many different people. For one man in particular, a young man of the world of Verdantia, who at first would not seem unlike so many other young men, the River of the Soul has truly been taking a different route.

This young man in particular is Belshimath Yonekdrezzin, a nobleman of Verdantia's merchant town Shokenhagen, and this is his story, his Stream of Fate. Truly, if nothing ever begins, then nothing ever ends, and any point at which we may decide to begin telling a story would seem arbitrary. However, every **story** has to begin somewhere, even a dark one such as this.

Well then, let us begin, as we find the point at which Belshimath's destiny took a very different path. Whether this path will lead to the high or low road is up to you to decide. The whole universe and its flow of living energies and times and dimensions, the River of the Soul, is made of many tributaries.

Yes, it is a mixing of not only different planes of existence, but also many different directions taken. Indeed, before that darkest of days in July of the year 2012 A.D., on which our ill-fated young man's life of nobility took a turn for the worse, he lived a life of wealth, peace, and prosperity. The eldest son of the House of Yonekdrezzin, the most prestigious of the noble houses of the South-East kingdom, served his people as a great knight and leader. No one shared the fiery passion for love and life that incessantly burned within him, no one but he whose name was Ethril Zyriphad, the warrior of the neighboring kingdom to the west.

Shokenhagen itself, located in the heart of the South-East Kingdom, was the trade capital of Verdantia. Its name was changed to Shokenhagen in the 15th century, to honor a family that greatly helped in making it the trade capital. They did so by bringing their famous skills and crafts to the already-prestigious town, which lured even more buyers and sellers there. The family came from Zyriphad town, known for its blacksmiths. They moved to each of the most prestigious towns, and learned each one's most famous craft.

In this way, Shokenhagen attracted highly skilled merchants and their shops to the area. These shops opened up many jobs for the surrounding towns, and many of the young adults from these towns joined the merchants in serving the Yonekdrezzin family and the towns that the family ruled. Over time, a bustling town was built around and protected by the noble house, to accommodate the many merchants and workers moving in.

The business people of Shokenhagen transacted not only amongst themselves, but also traded and did business with the surrounding towns, and even towns around the world. Goods, harvested crops, weapons and armor, books of magick, and other things of value were transported between the towns on horses and in caravans.

Surrounding the town was a 20-foot tall and utterly unscalable wall. The noble house, which also served as a stronghold, acted as a "gate". The stronghold was located in the front center of the wall built around it.

Also, the Yonekdrezzin family always employed the strongest, most highly trained warriors and sorcerers as their last line of defense. The noble family's eldest son was, according to

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Verdantian tradition, to be their highest-ranking officer, and lead them into battle. As if the solid steel and brick construction of the stronghold weren't enough, a magical dome could be placed around the structure, which would prevent anyone from coming in. All in all, no one with evil intentions was to be let into the town.

The town itself was laid out in a very organized, straightforward, business-like fashion. The front half of the town included all of the different markets, guilds, and shops. The back half included the many homes and farms that belonged to the townspeople. Altogether, the town measured 5 square miles and was populated by upwards of 4,000 people.

The people themselves had many different vocations and crafts. They were all unified, however, in that they all were artistic, passionate, and loyal. It was as if Belshimath's own great passion had rubbed off on every last one of his people.

Indeed, even Ethril Zyriphad, also a great warrior and nobleman, was also possessed of such a zest and zeal for living. Yes, Ethril Zyriphad, disciple of the spirit of Anacros Rozna-II, one of the original 7 Elders of the Eldritch Magick, Alchemy, and Necromancy that created the magical realm of Verdantia in 1012 A.D., was one of the prophesied magical knights to play a part in the defeat and banishment of a powerful anomalous spirit of dark undeath. This foul demon Azrafel, loosed from its magical chains in the dark Abyss, wreaked havoc on Earth until Luke Sergestus and Kaine Democles forced its retreat to Verdantia.

Verdantia had been created by the 7 Elders to be a perfect utopia, to be everything that Earth should be, to be a magical realm where many wonderful dreams may be realized. Unfortunately, the evil one poisoned this realm, and wherever the anomalous spirit hovered, its powerful evil magick tainted its surroundings. The evil one even possessed animals, snuffed out their life force, and re-animated them with an evil undeath. Ethril must banish this ambiguous antagonist before its evil effects taint Verdantia and all its inhabitants to the core.

Ethril's battle, then, is far from over. It has only just begun. As Ethril started upon his quest to heal his world, he could not have possibly foreseen the dark destiny that led his fate to intertwine with Belshimath's, and his becoming that which he most despised.

Both Ethril and Belshimath's journeys eventually led them to dark existences, to lives of unlife. It was the darkest of days. The day of Belshimath's meeting with fiendish fate cursed him with the blood-hungry unlife of vampirism. It was then that his entire existence took a turn for the worse, into darkness and depravity.

On the day of Belshimath's curse, the festering growth of darkness tainting the world was still spreading like a possessed tumor. Even the powerful magicians of the House of Yonekdrezzin were hard pressed to block the encroaching overgrowth of the unnatural evil magick, let alone reverse its effects, as it steadily gained strength from the life forces of animals and nature.

Many of Verdantia's noble houses' sorcerers were able to at least protect their towns. In some cases, they were able to defeat the unwillingly possessed creatures, and diminish the darkness that controlled them, with Ethril's help. One noble house, however, was taken over and possessed by the darkness itself! It was the House of Yonekdrezzin's greatest battle, and their

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greatest failure.

It all began at the twilight of that fateful day, when an assortment of possessed creatures stampeded towards the outskirts of the stronghold. This small, patchwork army of creatures consisted of 16 wolves, 15 boars, 14 bears, and 5 wyverns. These animals were possessed of the same darkness that had already tainted the surrounding landscape. That same dreary darkness did not spare the neighboring towns in its quest to control that noble house of Yonekdrezzin, that entire kingdom, even the entire world of Verdantia.

Fortunately, the House of Yonekdrezzin had received warnings of such attacks, thanks to notes delivered quickly and safely by messenger pigeons from nearby noble houses. The warriors and sorcerers intensified their training schedule to prepare for such an attack. The time was nigh to fight for a worthy cause! Always on the lookout for evil intruders, the security guard perched on his post high atop the stronghold beheld the coming onslaught, and quickly shouted his warning to the warriors within. There were two groups of defenders within. The first group was to confront the dark army outside, and the other, led directly by Belshimath himself, was to be the stronghold's last line of defense.

Upon receiving the call to arms, the prodigiously powerful warriors donned their armor and shields and swords, and the perennially perilous sorcerers donned their robes, as they all hurriedly shuffled into formation. The first group, made up of 15 warriors and 15 sorcerers, were then allowed to step from behind the magical dome onto the soon-to-be battlefield.

The warriors, each of which stood no less than 6 feet and embodied the epitome of martial strength, were to defend their noble family and their kingdom with their very lives. As they prepared to draw their swords, these most manly of men strategically stepped into offensive positions in the front line of the formation. Supporting them with the most powerful spells imaginable were the sorcerers. Each of them, until this fateful day, had gone unmatched in skill and might for decades, for each of their relatively small frames housed enormous power in the ways of magick.

However, The whole mood within the stronghold, as well as without, was one of great tension and nervousness, almost to the point of panic. Nonetheless, Shokenhagen's sworn protectors remained resolute, firm, and focused. There was no turning back, for nothing could possibly deter the will of the oncoming motley crew of creatures but sheer force.

The rumble of many mad feet finally stopped stone cold in front of the defenders. The two small armies were poised to pounce upon one another with unrelenting fury. All that could have been heard at that moment were heavy breathing, low growls, the slow swoop of mighty wings, the quiet chanting and waving of spells, and the slow unsheathing of swords.

In the very next moment, the tension was broken, as one of the warriors pointed his sword toward the beasts and bellowed "Charge!!!!"

Both sides, taking the cue, finally pounced at one another. Six of the wolves were the first to fall, as they leaped at the oncoming warriors, only to land on razor sharp swords. Five of the magicians then pooled their magick and crafted a mighty, living

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flame that sprouted upwards from the ground, 10 feet into the air. This angry flame chased the remaining wolves, as wolves are always greatly affrighted by fire.

The bears and boars, however, were a much different challenge. The other ten magicians cast spells of super endurance and super strength upon just as many warriors. These spells enabled them to withstand the hardest of blows and deal the hardest of blows as well.

All of the boars nonetheless charged at the protectors in unison. Their attack in turn motivated the wyverns to begin swooping in while breathing flames. By this point, the battle had reached a fever pitch.

Several of the boars as well had impaled themselves on swords, yet some of the warriors and sorcerers had been impaled as well, on strong, 11-inch tusks. One of the wyverns, speeding towards one of the sorcerers, caught a warrior's blade in the underbelly, and fell screeching and convulsing to the ground. Some of the huge, slow bears, finally catching up to the rest of the battlers, caught some of the warriors by surprise. Upon picking up these men, each of whom then seemed tiny in comparison, the strong, humongous bears snapped their spines with the least of effort. A small group of warriors then leaped at those bears and caught them in surprise in turn, as their skillful blades began to lop off head after head. Also of assistance in fighting the bears was that mad bonfire.

The four remaining wyverns were all the while using their flight to their advantage, as they cast their flames at each and every man. Four of the magicians took their turns at placing magical bonds on each of the four wyverns' wings, causing them to fall to the ground, while still flapping their wings violently, as they vainly attempted to break free. The warriors nearest the wyverns stabbed them directly in their hearts.

All this time, the boars were still running around at full speed, plowing through men as if they were rows of corn. By this point, there were 6 wolves, 9 boars, 7 bears, 6 warriors, 9 sorcerers, and of course, no wyverns. Fortunately for those remaining wolves, the magick that powered the living flame finally ran out. Those six wolves then leaped upon just as many warriors, as the bears and boars ganged up on the sorcerers. The warriors fell quickly, as the wolves' incredulous jaws tore out their scarcely-protected throats.

Four of the boars managed to impale just as many sorcerers before they were able to finish weaving together their last-resort spell of sacred power. The other five dodged and retaliated with supreme blasts of magically-empowered concussive force that blew all the creatures within several meters to heaps of ragged flesh. Those most unfortunate of creatures included 6 boars and 3 bears.

Those last standing magicians were extremely weary, their bodies greatly strained by the amount of power necessary to generate such great force. The bears closed in on one of them, overcoming him and shredding him to pieces. The wolves overcame another, and the boars yet another.

The two other sorcerers, even under such unenviable odds, pressed on. They tossed mighty flames and bolts of sacred power at the creatures, even as the foul fiends attacked the less fortunate sorcerers. However, their spells were no longer strong enough to

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deliver killing force to such magically enhanced beings. As the creatures turned to face the two remaining sorcerers, the worn and weary men suddenly knew that not only was that moment the single most horrifying moment in either of their lives, it was also their last. The entire group of wolves, sensing their fear, then overtook them, and easily extinguished their lives.

Such a travesty it was, for all of 30 men to die such horrible deaths. Evil, dark force continued to overpower all that was sacred. One might ask, what manner of man could indeed stop the living darkness bent on encompassing the world in its web of undeath?

All was not lost, however. Yet to be overcome were Yonekdrezzin's last line of defense. Among them were only the most battle-hardened of warriors and sorcerers. They were to protect the noble family by all means possible. Indeed, if these last protectors did not possess the power enough to defeat the evil minions, then the Yonekdrezzin family and all of Shokenhagen were doomed. Neither the warriors nor the sorcerers of the respective guilds in the town possessed the power or skill that the noble family's defenders commanded. Even as the last glints of life seeped out of the bleeding bodies of Yonekdrezzin's sworn protectors, the darkness cast aside the no-longer needed and tormented bodies of the animals. The darkness now had warriors and sorcerers to control.

In order to defeat the noble family and their protectors, the mystical dome had to be breached. Using their dark force as well as their newly-gained magical powers, acquired from the once-valorous sorcerers, the motley crue of undead wizards forged a cold, dark, melting spell that disabled and dissolved the once-impenetrable dome.

Inside, the warriors unsheathed their swords and the sorcerers began waving their spells of protection, as the sound of many horrors rumbled just outside the large bolted door. Even the most courageous warriors trembled, and knew that their hardest and most fearsome battle was a few mere moments away.

Upon looking out the tall stained-glass window at his side, Belshimath received quite a terrifying shock at the sight of his own people being possessed of such an overpowering evil. At his command, all the members of the noble family then withdrew from the huge throne room, and took shelter within hidden inner sanctums. Even as Belshimath unsheathed his own sword, the Yonekdrezzin sword forged in holy magick and intended for use only in such dire situations as this, the undead warriors began ramming their full weight into the door repeatedly. They had such force, that the stronghold's entire foundation quaked and threatened to fall.

Taking the cue, the warriors took their fighting stances and the sorcerers imbued them and their swords with holy magick, so as to enable them to better fight the dark ones and lay their once-heroic bodies to a peaceful death without the all-encompassing darkness of evil. Even then, the undead warriors overpowered the mighty strength of the stronghold's iron door and barged in with swords flailing.

"Fight!! Fight for the glory of Verdantia!", came Belshimath's war cry, "Let not your spirits succumb to the same darkness that now enslaves our brethren!"

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The very warriors and sorcerers of Yonekdrezzin moved against their former leaders. The living and the unliving met in a mighty clash of much magick and mettle. Those remaining warriors of Yonekdrezzin were undaunted by the sheer strength of the undead ones, and the fact that the undead outnumbered them two to one. A downhill battle it seemed to be for the living warriors, yet they fought long and hard. The battle stretched on for an hour, and the undead began to gain the upper hand, even though no less than half of the dark warriors had been downed by being so severely injured that they could no longer move. Even Belshimath, managing to skillfully evade most of the blows and spells dealt him, sustained great damage.

The sorcerers, in a last ditch maneuver, tossed a multitude of incredibly powerful fire spells at the undead. Creatures of undeath take great damage from fire, especially magical holy fire. The unliving warriors and sorcerers began to drop one by one, having been reduced to piles of crispy bones.

Even then, near the end of the battle with multiple casualties on both sides, the undead still standing continued to press forward. The undead sorcerers pooled their remaining energies and unleashed a final, desperate, yet powerful spell that sucked most of the heat out of the air, therefore reducing the temperature to subzero so rapidly that only the toughest of the remaining men barely survived.

One by one, the darkness that overpowered the undead warriors began to overpower the other warriors as well. Even the noble family, all the members of which were frozen almost to death where they hid, was not spared. With possession of the strongest house and their stronghold, it would now be possible for the darkness to begin the conquest of the rest of Verdantia.

However, Belshimath's spirit had not yet succumbed to the indomitable will of the darkness. Even through the incapacitating cold, the great heat of his anger burned. The darkness was unable to snuff out the powerful strength of his spirit and the undefeatable will of his mind, and therefore was only able to affect his body. Belshimath's strength and purity of heart forced out the darkness; unfortunately, the darkness left his body with the curse of vampirism.

As his body began to make the shift, he momentarily fell unconscious. When he awoke, he looked around him with his new eyes, and perceived things he had never perceived before. His vision had become sharper than the mightiest of swords. Even in the still, cold air, he heard many things that human ears could never hope to hear. He felt the cold in the air, yet it didn't hurt him. He then understood that the dark ones had endowed him with a body that worked on a much higher level.

Belshimath made his first move in his new body, as he stood up and took a step. He felt such strength, he believed he could fly, which he did in the next moment! He began to wonder if this was not a curse, but a blessing. However, as he flew slowly by the large mirror that loomed over the throne at the back of the room, he saw in it no trace of a reflection of himself.

He turned back in mid-air towards the mirror, to reassure himself of what he thought he saw. Upon landing on his own two feet again, he gazed at the mirror, and pondered for a long moment as to how it forgot to reflect him. He then remembered reading ancient Verdantian legends of supernatural undead creatures that had been once human, yet given a dark, magical curse.

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These beings, called vampires, defied most physical laws, as their bodies operated on a level spiritually higher than other physical things. The vampires originally came to Verdantia through a magical portal from Earth during the Middle Ages, in order to escape the Black Death that ravaged all of Europe. The disease in the blood would also kill them.

Granted unto them was superhuman strength, speed, endurance, healing, intelligence, magical abilities, and heightened senses. Also granted them was immortality. These attributes did not come without a price, however. As vampires were nocturnal beings and not to mention undead, they sustained great damage from strong sources of natural light, such as fire or daylight. Sacred magick as well had very damaging effects on vampires. Perhaps the most gruesome part of their curse was their need to consume the blood of living things in order to maintain their immortality.

Ironically, all the remaining vampires of Verdantia had been wiped out centuries before, in a revolt by the commoners who tired of the foul fiends preying upon them nightly. Some vampires were dragged out of their caskets into broad daylight, others were burned at the stake, and others were defeated and left to die by groups of powerful magicians. Even others were surprise-attacked, surrounded, and beaten beyond any possible healing, and many more had their heads hewn off in public executions. Not a one was spared. Verdantia was altogether cleansed of vampirism.

It was with all of that in mind that Belshimath wondered what could explain the situation at hand. Still gazing into the reflection-less mirror, he grimaced, and licked his teeth thoughtfully. It was then that he first noticed one of the distinguishing characteristics of a vampire - the two upper bicuspids had taken the form of sharp fangs that could pierce the strongest steel without threat of breaking.

Belshimath had indeed inherited the curse of vampirism. Thusly he became a sort of "physical spirit", and no longer conformed to most average physical laws, hence the mirror's inability to reflect him. He had become perceivable only to other living things, which contained that breath of life and spirit, and sensed such things.

Having taken all of this to heart, the once-living nobleman turned towards to center of the room, to face his fallen people, only to find a shock in the troupe of bloody zombies before him. All of the undead came to worship him, yet the sight horrified him. The sight of the now misshapen and distorted figures of his comrades and loved ones all at once appalled, disgusted, and greatly saddened him.

"Mere minutes ago I would have died for my people, yet at this moment I want to die because of them!" Belshimath grieved aloud, "What manner of man would ask for such a horrible fate, such a curse, such a dark, living death as this? Verdantia the beautiful has yet become a wasteland before mine eyes: what glory shall I find now in fighting such cursed battles for the sake of such a hopeless world? I might as well be dead: gone to me now are the simple joys of running my fingers through my fair lady's hair, listening to the happy laughter of children, walking in the sun, talking with friends about anything and everything for many hours..."

"Things such as these many scientists and philosophers may consider trivial on the cosmic scale, yet they are indeed important. They are among the most important things to a man,

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woman, or child, and it pains me that I can no longer enjoy them. In having been given a new life, my old life was taken away."

"So what if a man is cursed with a weak body and a short life span as well as sin and temptation? I would rather have the curse of man again than the curse of vampire. I would rather have my own blood than the blood of another. Yet, in willing to continue living and continue fighting the dark ones, I became one of the unliving, one of the dark ones, yet with a man's mind that pains my whole being with such sad thoughts and horrible revelations."

"I gave up one curse for another, one life for another, yet I can imagine no darker a fate than this, and there can not be sung a more somber song than this, in this Theater of Cacophonies. Yet why do I want to go on? What hope is there for me now? Perhaps I should continue my spiritual longsuffering, even through this curse, even as I continued through my previous curse. Perhaps there is eternal salvation for he whose fate would at first seem eternal damnation."

"O my God, I pray that Thou couldst have mercy upon my troubled soul. O God, Thou sayest that Thou shall forsake not one of your children! I pray that it shall be so with me as well, my Lord. All I can do for now is await he whose lot in life is to cleanse Verdantia of this oppressive overgrowth of evil, he whose name is Ethril Zyriphad!"

"I am afraid that he can be of no good service to me, as my whole being has been irreversibly tainted and transmogrified, and cursed with such a loathsome, blood-curdling curse. I shall nonetheless welcome him with the warmth of the nobleman that I once was, and still am at heart, even though he shall despise me for what I have unwillingly become."

"Yes, the night is young, and I must gird myself for the inevitable meeting with the warrior; indeed, this shall be the first night of the rest of my unlife..."

With that, Belshimath sat in the throne, and appeared as noble and regal and strong as he ever did. He found comfort and hope in knowing that he retained his own consciousness and judgment, and was willing to die again to find the peace, and perhaps the final glory, that he sought. However, his death would not come at the hand of the soon-to-come noble warrior. Nonetheless, Belshimath commanded the undead to go to the inner sanctums, as he sat alone in his thoughts, waiting for the one named Ethril.

Ethril's legend had been spread far and wide throughout the many towns of Verdantia, because of his brave and generous deeds. These included serving and giving to his people with unending munificence, as well as leading a victorious battle against a group of wizards that had given themselves over to the darkness. In such a seemingly perfect world, one would not expect anyone to give him or herself over to evil. Nonetheless, it was a portent of the evil that was to come in the form of the anomalous spirit that ravaged the realm of Verdantia.

Ethril's quest to banish the ambiguous antagonist will go

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down in legend as the greatest battle ever fought, and the greatest feat ever accomplished by one man, in the history of the world. That battle will only be the first, however. This war is far from over. The dark one's "living" aftereffects have diseased the planet, and introduced a level of evil not known to the world since the Age of Vampires. Surely, all people have their dark sides, even the people of Verdantia. Even so, nothing prepared these people for the dark holocaust that began wreaking havoc all over the world.

As the War of Darkness began raging around the world, Ehril has traveled from town to town and kingdom to kingdom, quickly following the seemingly erratic trail of the dark lord Azrafel. He has also assisted in every way possible. Beginning in his own kingdom in the South-West, Ehril began journeying eastward while using his powerful sacred magick to help cleanse the most thickly tainted and infested areas. The wizards of each of these areas wiped out any leftover traces. The mages of the less-affected areas were able to at least protect their towns, and in many cases, destroy the living darkness.

Belshimath himself had received word of Ehril's holy quest, and realized that he would come to cleanse the now-overtaken House of Yonekdrezzin. As told to Belshimath by his family's messenger on the morn of this most accursed of days, Ehril's journey would lead him through their area late that very night. The noble vampire sat forlorn and disconsolate, yet with his usual poise and grace, in the once-glorious throne room.

While still seeking spiritual solace from his internal struggle with his curse, Belshimath continued to await Ehril's arrival, even though he knew the young warrior could do nothing to improve his condition. The curse of vampirism, once inherited, is nearly impossible to reverse. It would take the greatest of miracles to truly "heal" a person plagued with the dark gift. Belshimath waited nonetheless. By the midnight hour, Ehril and his horse Mercury had already covered much ground towards the next noble house and town to be visited. These were Yonekdrezzin and Shokenhagen, respectively.

Ehril was well into the second day of his journey to destroy the dark one and cleanse his world, yet he and his trusty steed still did not tire. Even on the path to Yonekdrezzin, their pace never slowed. Along the way, he saw signs of stampede, and sensed strong traces of the anomalous darkness hiding among the dark of night.

He prodded his trusty steed to speed up to a healthy gallop, as they followed the trail. It became obvious to Ehril that Yonekdrezzin must have already been attacked. Hoping otherwise, yet deep down knowing better, he prodded Mercury even more. After half an hour of fast travel along the beaten path of the stampede, Ehril and Mercury arrived at the ill-fated stronghold of Yonekdrezzin. Momentarily shocked by all the carnage and gore,

Ehril stared at the bloody battlefield in disbelief. Fortifying his will with a silent prayer, he dismounted. He urged Mercury to heel and not move an inch, even though the horse then began to panic - as if sensing the cursed being within the stronghold. Trusting the animal's instinct, Ehril then took a moment to pool some magical reserves, in case of a need for battle.

Searching for the cleanest path to the door, he unwillingly

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trudged through pools of blood and mutilated bodies. To his relief, the door was already open.

However, even the door was in disarray. Looking within, Ethril noticed signs of battle. Ironically, there were no dead bodies lying around, or walking around. The only "living" soul was the vampire sitting in the throne. Why, Ethril wondered was this vampire clad in the armor of a noble protector?

He was a vampire, that much Ethril knew. There was no trace of a reflection of him in the mirror behind. Even so, nothing would deter the young warrior from continuing his mission. Even this vampire, this cursed being of darkness, must be destroyed, Ethril thought. Finally finding the resolve within himself that he needed to step forward, Ethril proceeded inward.

"Welcome to the House of Yonekdrezzin!" Belshimath welcomed Ethril with as much charisma as he could muster. "I am the eldest son, Belshimath. You go by the name of Ethril Zyriphad, I presume?"

'Indeed I do,' Ethril answered, 'I have met you a few times before, on my travels through this area. Yet, you appear to be a vampire, the sort of evil that I have only heard tell of in Verdantian lore. I suppose you gave your soul to the dark side, that you could make yourself lord over the possessed creatures plaguing the world, and attempt to conquer all of Verdantia?'

"I am indeed a vampire." Belshimath acknowledged. "Too bad you missed the party, however. it was a real killer."

'Don't jest with me. Just answer my question. Now. Before I drive an oak stake through your black, loveless heart.'

"Oh, you naive young man. Would I, a righteous nobleman of glorious Verdantia, give myself over to the very dark side that we so detest? Never! This curse was given to me as a result of my battle with the dark force that even now continues to taint our world. My protectors and family were both completely overcome by the darkness, yet my spirit would not succumb, and therefore only my body was cursed. At heart, I am still the nobleman that I always was."

'I shall never trust a vampire, as a vampire's mind and heart are turned evil by his dark curse and hunger for blood.'

"That shows how little you truly know of the human spirit. I can sense your great passion and spirit. Those are what drive you on, day after day, even through times of pain and weariness, to continue your quest to heal the world. I understand you completely in that respect. I am strong of spirit as well, and it is that strength that makes me keep going when it seems all hope is lost. Indeed, it is that strength that will not allow me to be overcome by the evil nature of my curse."

'I do not believe you, you foul blood monger! I must not leave you alive, and take the chance that you will doublecross me later, take my blood, and leave me for dead. I must stop you now, you impostor!'

"Silly human. It matters not what manner of man or beast you've been able to conquer in the past. At your current level, you are unprepared to fight a vampire."

'What? You must be very afraid of me! You do not wish to fight me!'

"I do not wish to kill you - we need not fight. You are wasting your time with me. Go on, see if you can heal my protectors and my family..."

'Your melodrama will not save you. I am not wasting my time with you, you fiend! Enough talk, then! Let's see what you're made

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of, vampire! En garde!!!'

Realizing that Ethril was not to be bargained with, Belshimath slowly stood up. The noble vampire was angered by the young one's brazen attitude and tenacity. This anger caused his eyes to glow a bright blue, and a tide of mystical energies began to ebb and flow about his frame. Ethril himself used a potion of haste, and proceeded to unsheathe his sword.

Ethril leaped at Belshimath, ready to come down upon him with a barrage of strikes from his sword. Belshimath flew so quickly towards Ethril that he became a blur. He parried all of Ethril's attacks, but was caught by surprise by a blow to the chin, from a speedy kickflip to the jaw. Any other opponent would have been knocked unconscious, but Belshimath was no longer any other opponent. Belshimath delivered a near-mortal blow to Ethril's mid-section during the recovery of the kick. Reeling from the incredible concussive force, the young warrior slid backwards on the floor for no less than 20 feet. Belshimath flew over to Ethril and began to speak.

"If I'm sensing correctly, I don't think you have quite enough magic left to cure these rather serious wounds. Nor does it appear you have any potions left in your satchel. If I leave you here, your internal damage will cause you to drown in your own blood, and you'll live for only a few more minutes. I can save you, however. Do you want to live, or to die?!"

'L...Luh...Live...'

"So be it! Open wide..."

Slitting his wrist with his fangs, Belshimath held Ethril's head to the dripping blood. Ethril accepted the offering, as he allowed the rivulet of the life-giving liquid to stream into his mouth. Belshimath lay the young warrior's head down again, as he waited for the blood to take effect.

Through Belshimath's cursed blood, Ethril was given the curse of vampirism as well. In a matter of moments, the internal damage healed. Moments after that, his body completed the transformation. His skin became a pale pink pallor, and the color of his eyes became a more glorious shade of blue. Finally, the characteristic fangs grew in.

In trying to cleanse the world of the darkness he so hated, Ethril ended up becoming one cursed with darkness. At least he was still alive, in a manner of speaking. Lowering his ego was the least that Ethril could have done to return the favor.

'Ugh...What...What have you done to me, Belshimath? I am not as I was! Answer me!'

"You are now a vampire. To drink a vampire's blood is to become one yourself."

'You didn't tell me that!!!'

"You didn't have much choice, did you?"

'No, but you're the one that attacked me!'

"Well, you attacked me first!"

'So what if I did? I'd rather be dead than be a vampire!'

"Technically speaking, you ARE dead."

'Aaackk! You know what I mean!! I resent what I have become!'

"Indeed. You have become what you most despise. Do not succumb to the all-engulfing sorrow that comes with accepting your fate, however."

'How shall I remain human at heart? I am afraid that this curse shall overcome me! We will eventually hunger for blood! What then?'

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"Fear not. The dark curse lords over our bodies, but not our souls. You are too strong of purity and spiritual force to let the evil overcome you."

'Perhaps you are right. Even though this curse would not have been my first choice for a new start, I must still express my thanks. Maybe you're not the cruel, cold-hearted monster I took you for at first.'

"You're quite welcome. I can understand the anger and resentment you feel. I felt the same way when I awoke to a new existence of darkness and depravity. Also, I don't blame you for thinking what you did of me at first. Were I you, I would have thought the same. Appearances can be deceiving."

'Right. Perhaps the two of us could provide comfort for one another, in sharing each other's grievances. There may be some hope for salvation for our souls after all.'

"Yes, I'd like to believe so. God wants to forsake none of his children, not one."

'And that's what matters most. Surely, there is indeed hope for us cursed beings! The question is, however, what is our next step?'

"What of the rest of the world? It yet suffers from the plague that made me what I am. I shall help you continue your quest to defeat this dark lord."

'A mighty fine, idea. I believe I will need all the help I can get. What of your people, however? While we are here, we must tend to them!'

"That we shall. All of the protectors as well as my family were overcome by the darkness. Ironically enough, they began to worship me! I commanded them to go to the inner sanctums, where they now remain. Perhaps I could go and command the darkness that now controls them to flee."

'Interesting theory. It should work!'

"Indeed it should. Even if it does, there is the chance that the darkness would then go and overtake others. In light of that possibility, we should enlist the aid of holy wizards, as we are no longer the ones to defeat the darkness."

'What are you saying? Will my magick no longer do?'

"Your magick is turned to the dark side now, unfortunately." Belsimath explained. "Darkness cannot expel darkness. Even if we were to summon holy power, it would cause us great damage, as we are beings of darkness now. All we can do is defeat the possessed creatures and bid their darkness flee. It is the holy wizards who shall be able to truly cleanse the world of that darkness, and heal the animals.'

'So that is the way it must be.' Ethril said as he accepted the truth of the situation. 'Yet we are both warriors, and still the noblemen we ever were. We shall continue this fight, at all costs.'

"Then let us begin anew!" Belshimath said with a toothy grin. "I'm glad the darkness went no further than this stronghold. We can go into town to recruit the wizards of Shokenhagen's famed magick guild. They will be glad to see me, even at this late hour."

It was thusly that the flame of hope was rekindled in the spirits of Belshimath Yonekdrezzin and Ethril Zyriphad. They began on their new plan to heal the world. This was their chance to use their powers for a good cause, as well as find salvation for their tormented souls.

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The townspeople knew not of these developments, however. The stronghold had been strangely silent for hours after the battle, which made everyone wonder as to whether anyone survived inside. Fortunately, the back door of the stronghold was barred and locked from within the town. Nonetheless, everyone was terrified, and had reason to be.

The security guard that informed the family's defenders of the attack had immediately thereafter informed the warrior guild as well. The warrior guild, ever ready to fight and protect, is to act as the town militia in times of war. Unfortunately, even the security guard was not spared a dark death.

The warriors yet prepared for what seemed to be an inevitable battle within the town itself. Everyone, even the bravest of the warriors, was shaken by the fearsome sounds of the mad stampede and the battle that ensued afterward. Even more terrifying was the destruction of the magical dome and the deafening clash that followed. They could not tell from the sounds of battle who was winning and who was losing.

When finally all was silent, they waited for what had to come next. Either the door would be broken down and they would be attacked, or they would be informed of the Yonekdrezzin victory. They waited but only encountered a long silence in the pitch black of night. Could everyone have been killed and no one left to tell the tale?

They remained battle-ready before the great door of the stronghold. So tense were they while they awaited any motion from within the stronghold, that many of them jumped no less than a foot into the air when a knock was heard from the other side of that door. They all looked at each other for a long, strange moment before proceeding to identify the late-night "visitor". The captain, Quadratus Sacrator, spoke through the door.

"Identify yourself," Quadratus answered, "and are ye friend or foe? 'Twould not be wise to incur the wrath of the strongest militia in all of the South-East Kingdom."

"It is I, Belshimath, the eldest son of Yonekdrezzin! I am the lone survivor of this gruesome battle.", Belshimath replied, "Even so, I have the wandering warrior Ethril Zyriphad by my side. He has come to help us in every way possible. Our wizards may still save some of the fallen, if we allow them to work quickly."

"Wonderful news! Lord Belshimath survived!" Quadratus explained excitedly to his men, "Ethril Zyriphad, Verdantia's saviour, will join us in our battle! We shall now let them through to ask the assistance of our wizards, that they may save the battle's fallen."

The large, heavy door was unlocked, unbarred, and opened slowly. As Belshimath and Ethril stepped through the threshold, all of the warriors assumed their formations on either side of the road and saluted them. Every man, even in the scarce light, noticed the pale countenances of the noble warriors. They began to gossip as to the explanation, and Quadratus finally suggested that the pair must have been weak and weary from their recent battles. That was fortunate enough for Ethril and Belshimath, as they had no time to explain at that moment.

Belshimath led Ethril towards the magick guild. Surprisingly enough, the guild was obviously still open, as the wizards were burning the midnight oil, working on spells and strategies. They too had heard the reports of attacks on nearby towns, and were

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preparing for a possible attack on theirs.

Belshimath let himself into the mystical, yet well-decorated building. It smelled of mold, dust, burning oil, and decades-old spellbooks. The wizards, 15 in all, enthusiastically greeted the two warriors, and bid them sit down to inform them of the situation.

They listened quite attentively as Belshimath told them the bad news, and then the good news. The wizards listened even more attentively as Belshimath told them of the plan that he and Ethril had formulated. A good plan it was, they all agreed.

The chief wizard, Theocles Vertiscus, an ancient man whose young face defied his great age, was in fact 283 years old! He had used magick over the years to lengthen his lifespan. Even with his great skill in magick, he admitted, it would still take much planning and care to pull off the warriors' plan. Never in his long lifetime had he ever faced an evil threat on such a level.

Nonetheless, all of the wizards pledged their hearts and souls to the plan. First things first, however, as they all went to heal the noble family and their protectors. only after exorcising the stronghold could they move on to the rest of the world.

Upon re-entering the stronghold, Belshimath decided to waste no time in simple melodrama as he commanded the undead to show themselves. The wizards, although toughened by their many decades of hard work and experience, yet stood aghast at the unliving horror that the noble family and their defenders had become. Nonetheless, time was of the essence if there was any hope for their souls to be saved from the evil that had already snuffed out their very wills.

Belshimath bid the darkness flee from its unwilling captives and torment their souls no more. The darkness, following the vampire's request, indeed fled the ravaged bodies it possessed. The wizards, standing by and ready, cast spells of holy light. These beams of sacred power homed in on the dark force, and dissipated it. That having been accomplished, they then began their magical healing upon the fallen people.

Unfortunately, many of the warriors' and sorcerers' bodies were ravaged and mutilated beyond any hope of still harboring the souls that had once inhabited them. In fact, only 5 of them were in any shape to be revived and healed. The noble family, however, was in much better condition. Each one of them had sustained severe frostbite, which was repaired in quite a timely fashion, thanks to the skills and experience possessed by Shokenhagen's world-renowned wizards.

As the healed ones sat and regrouped for a moment, Belshimath, Ethril, and crew all took seats in the throne room to discuss the finer details of the strategy. They talked and laughed for many hours, nearly until dawn. Even in such hard times, men will be men. Such powerful morale, nonetheless, is always a good thing to see in times of war.

One cannot forget, however, that war always brings with it much pain and misery, and worst of all, death. Many things cannot be settled with force, nor should they. Some things, however, cannot be settled without force. The War of Darkness, without a shadow of a doubt, was one of them. On that fateful night, that night of seemingly unending death and evisceration, every one of Shokenhagen's new heroes realized that certainty.

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The next battles of the War of Darkness, however, would have to be commenced upon the setting of the sun the very next evening. It would be necessary to honor those who died in battle before seeking justice. Also, the wizards had much preparation ahead of them. They were to first join the noble family in their mourning for the defenders lost in the gruesome battle. They were to then boost morale among the warriors of Shokenhagen's warrior guild, as well as gather the necessary scrolls, spell books, spell rods, food, and such other supplies for the ventures and battles.

Theocles himself was to speak to the people in a town meeting to reassure them of the developments, and reassure them that the people of Verdantia were indeed going to reclaim their world from the encroaching overgrowth of darkness. He was also to hand-pick new wizard and warrior recruits from among the townspeople. Townsfolk with competent skills and experience in either area were to be recruited into the stronghold, or the growing army of crusaders who were to cleanse their land and free it from the darkness. The other towns would also need to be sent the good news of the new strategy and the coming crusaders.

Most of all, Belshimath and Ethril would have to take refuge in the stronghold's inner sanctums during the daylight hours. Nonetheless, the two warriors had formed a glorious new purpose for themselves, in using their great strength of spirit to overcome the great sadness that was within them. Life, or shall we say unlife, became far more important as they joined the new battles for the glory of all things sacred and good.

As the wizards left to begin their own preparations for the battles ahead, Ethril and Belshimath stepped from out of the stronghold, and into the dark of the very-early-morning hours, under a starry sky that had only the slightest pinking and purpling at the horizon that forewarned of the sun's imminent approach. The thought came to both of them at once: Before anyone began cleaning up the carnage of the battlefield, they had just enough time to have a magnificent bloodfeast.

"In the way of righteousness **is** life: and **in** the pathway **thereof** there **is** no death." - Proverbs 13:28

~Journey Concepts~

An Astral Quest of Horror and Fantasy

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